



## Denali Borough Assembly Candidate Forum Report, 2011

*Cantwell resident **Gordon Carlson** is running unopposed for Seat A. He has filled this seat, by appointment, since Cantwell's former representative stepped down, and has served on the Assembly before. He was raised in Cantwell, and is running to ensure local representation. He would like to see more economic opportunities throughout the Borough, rather than focused solely around Healy and Denali Park, and would also like to expand educational opportunities.*

*Healy incumbent **Vickie Lausen** has served on the Assembly in Seat E for three years and would like to continue the work she has begun. She is a local business owner, and has three children who have graduated from Tri-Valley School in Healy. She would like to continue working on economic development, and promoting business both large and small. She also pointed to the importance of education, and how important the schools were to our communities.*

*Healy resident **William "Rusty" Lasell** is also seeking to fill Assembly Seat E. He has played a major role in the Borough's Volunteer Fire Department and with emergency services. He would like to see the Borough's status as a "Home-Ruled" Borough more-fully realized, and pointed out the value of local citizens in the decision making process here. He would like to work on our local ability to help each other and ensure safety. He also pointed out the importance of investing in quality education, and ensuring that jobs are available for students when they leave the school system.*

Candidates were asked to identify **short-term and long-term goals for the Borough**. Lasell suggested that the Borough should be aggressive in promoting economic development, and establishing job opportunities. Carlson agreed, and added that he feels the Borough is doing fine now, but that we need to make sure that long-term goals are viable. Lausen pointed out that the redistricting options up for vote on this year's ballot is a pressing issue now, and that over the long-term she would like to make sure that the diverse residents of the Denali Borough work side by side. She stated that communication would be key for this.

When asked specifically about thoughts on **redistricting options on this year's ballot**, comments were similar. Carlson and Lausen both pointed out that reducing the number of seats on the Assembly and School Board (part of Ordinance 11-16) could save the Borough some money, and Lausen added that a single district could alleviate some of the workload that comes with redistricting every 10 years. Carlson and Lasell both pointed out the benefits of some form of at-large voting (part of both options) in encouraging candidates to get out into different communities, and encouraging more residents to vote. Lasell pointed out that a potential negative of moving to a single voting district (Ordinance 11-16) is that it may seem like larger communities have more representation. Lausen acknowledged that there has been a rift between communities in the past, but said that it seems this rift is not as much of a problem currently.

Candidates were also questioned about the **ballot proposal to increase the Borough's severance tax**. This tax has not been changed since its initial implementation, and the ballot proposal would increase the tax from five cents per ton for coal and limestone and per cubic yard for gravel, to nine cents. Lausen pointed out that the Borough's only other tax, the Accommodation (i.e. "bed") tax, has been raised several times. She agrees with efforts to bring this tax in line with Consumer Price



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Index increases over the years. Carlson does not feel that a raise in the tax is necessary, pointing out that the Borough's budget is "in the black" and that, for any form of sales tax, no increase is necessary at this time. Lasell was also not convinced that an increase is necessary as the Borough's finances are currently sound.

Another question asked candidates how they feel the Borough should **manage (sell, lease or develop) the Municipal Land Entitlements received from the state**, totaling over 50,000 acres. All three Assembly candidates agreed that getting the land into private hands was beneficial. Lasell pointed out that anytime land could be put into the hands of individuals and businesses it was good. Carlson and Lausen noted that all three management options could be appropriate. Carlson suggested that the most valuable land be sold, land that could not be sold could be leased, and if land needed to be developed before there was interest in leasing it, this development could be done by the Borough. Lausen added that the costs of any form of management should be identified prior to management actions, and noted that the Planning Commission is currently working on options for Borough land.

One question asked candidates **what services should be provided for citizens**, noting that current services required of the Borough include solid waste management and education. Carlson is satisfied with maintaining only these services, and supports residents who want additional services working at a smaller scale (i.e. within individual communities or homeowner groups) to develop these services, for example developing service areas to provide road maintenance. Lausen and Lasell both seemed more supportive to developing additional services. Lausen specified that safe pedestrian walkways were important to her Borough-wide. Lasell pointed out that fire protection is not a required Borough service, but is generously supported, and added that as a home-ruled Borough, more services could be provided, if residents want them.

Candidates were asked to identify **what budget allocations should be increased or cut**. Carlson pointed out that the Borough currently funds the School District to the maximum extent. He would like to see what more we can do to keep the schools alive. He couldn't identify an area that needs to be cut at this time. Lausen said that the Borough would benefit from increased funding for new Borough Trails Committee. She questioned the need for some equipment purchased by the Borough in recent years, and whether construction of the new transfer station building in Cantwell is being done at the lowest cost. Lasell said the Borough should invest more money in promoting job opportunities, both to attract and maintain residents. He also could not identify any areas that needed cuts to funding, and stated that he'd rather focus on making more money to fund what needs to be funded, rather than make cuts.

Candidates were asked to speak about whether the **Borough should promote tourism**. All three candidates support promoting tourism, with different ideas for how to best implement. Lasell pointed out that there is no reason the Denali Borough shouldn't advertise itself, and feels that the Borough could create opportunities for visitors to come here. Carlson agreed, and added that much of the Borough's tourism potential is untapped. Lausen talked about the need for increased funding



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to promote tourism, pointing out that 75% of the Borough's income comes from the bed tax. She added that the Borough should not limit themselves to partnerships with tourism-related businesses.

Candidates were asked about their **support for developing trails in the Borough**, not only to support tourism, but also to promote safe transportation options for local residents. All candidates were haltingly supportive. Lasell acknowledged that there is a demand for trails in the Borough, but cautioned that property ownership should be established, and indicated that he had liability concerns. Carlson agreed. Lausen stated that she wanted to see more trails, but that they don't necessarily need to be developed by the Borough. She feels that the Borough could be a useful tool to help with grassroots efforts to develop trail systems.

The last question asked candidates whether or not there are **air quality issues** in the Denali Borough and if so, what measures they would support to fix the problem. Lasell acknowledged inversions that cause poorer air quality, but stated that the issues weren't significant enough at this time to require any measures to remedy. Lausen admitted to smelling coal at night when windows are left open, but stated that she was not bothered by it "because it supports our community." She added that we could remedy any problems by policing ourselves (for example using more efficient boilers), and work to be good to our neighbors. Carlson said he did not think there were any issues with air quality, and joked that the wind blows enough here to keep the air circulating.