



Representative McLawhorn's News from Raleigh

February 22, 2007

On Monday night, Governor Mike Easley delivered his fourth State of the State address at the General Assembly, which was broadcast live across the state. The governor focused largely on education and gave us a sneak preview of his budget, which was unveiled on Thursday and will be discussed by legislators next week.

The governor asked legislators to provide more financial assistance to college students. He encouraged improved technology in all high schools as part of our efforts to expand the state's Learn and Earn program, which gives students the chance to take college or university classes and receive a high school diploma and an associate's degree in five years. He also announced his plan to cut income taxes for an estimated 1.2 million low- and middle-income North Carolinians.

Members of the House and Senate have introduced close to 700 pieces of legislation during the first month of the 2007 session, which started on January 24. This week's highlights include bills focused on providing affordable health care to North Carolina's more than 1.3 million uninsured, banning smoking in public places, reducing gang violence.

Governor's 2007-08 Budget

Gov. Mike Easley released his state budget proposal for the next two years on Thursday morning during a press conference. My colleagues and I at the General Assembly will receive an extensive briefing on it next week. The governor's budget is expected to provide greater details regarding the new initiatives he unveiled during Monday night's State of the State address. The announcement of the governor's budget officially kicks off the budget process in Raleigh. Over the next several months, the House and Senate will pass their own budget proposals, in hopes of passing a final budget before the start of the new fiscal year on July 1.

Improving Health Care in NC

Several bills were introduced this week, which focused on improving the health of North Carolinians. Rep. Verla Insko, D-Orange, introduced legislation (House Bill 265) that would establish a high-risk insurance pool, which has already gained the support of 53 co-sponsors in the House, including myself. The bill seeks to help people who cannot afford health insurance because of pre-existing health conditions. Supporters of the high-risk pool say this is a first step toward providing affordable health care to more than

1.3 million North Carolinians who do not have health insurance. The House passed a similar bill in 2006, but it was not considered by the Senate before adjournment.

Another bill (House Bill 259) has been introduced to better protect the health of North Carolinians by banning smoking in public places, such as restaurants and work places. Exceptions are made for bars and private clubs, retail tobacco shops and designated rooms in hotels.

The Future of Hog Farming in North Carolina

The North Carolina Pork Council and Progress Energy said in a press conference on Monday afternoon that they've found an economical way to generate energy from farm waste. They asked legislators to create a seven-year pilot program that would test the feasibility of converting hog waste from across the state into electricity, which could be sold to the utility company no later than late 2012. If approved by the General Assembly, hog producers would collect methane gas from their treatment systems and convert it to power. Under the pilot program, Progress Energy would purchase the electricity generated at about 18 cents per kilowatt hour – significantly more than the 4.5 cents to the 5.5 cents usually paid by other non-utility generators. The program could help the hog industry develop a new use for hog waste, which would further increase the state's renewable energy sources and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Under federal law, Progress Energy and other utility companies are required to buy electricity from renewable energy generators and other small electricity producers.

On Tuesday, environmentalists and neighbors of hog farms in eastern North Carolina held a press conference and walked the halls of the General Assembly to meet with legislators to urge them to approve a permanent ban on animal waste lagoons and spray fields, and replace those that already exist with safer methods of disposal. A 10-year state moratorium on new hog lagoons is set to expire in September. North Carolina is the nation's second-largest swine-producing state and its hog farms dump 13 million pounds of hog waste a day into open-air pits called lagoons, which is later sprayed on fields as fertilizer. Farmers say the practice is the only economically feasible way to handle the waste, but opponents say it's an environmental danger, spoiling the air and contaminating groundwater and rivers. Last spring, a report recommended five alternatives that would reduce ammonia and pathogen emissions, but which could cost up to five times more than the lagoon and spray-field method. Environmental groups and swine farmers launched two pilot projects last summer to dispose of the waste more safely.

Also Tuesday, Rep. Dewey Hill, D-Columbus, introduced legislation (House Bill 275) to extend the existing moratorium on new hog farms and lagoons by three years, to September 2010.

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