



Representative McLawhorn's News from Raleigh

March 20, 2008

In our General Assembly, we know that it's not enough to simply spend taxpayer money. We must make sure that money is used wisely. We have set up a system at the General Assembly that tracks performance during the time between sessions through the use of oversight committees, among other tools. During this interim, there are nearly a dozen oversight committees with legislators who meet regularly to monitor areas such as education, transportation, health care, mental health, capital improvements and corrections.

During this past session, the General Assembly also created a new division to evaluate programs funded by the General Assembly. The non-partisan Program Evaluation Division is made up of policy and fiscal analysts with experience in government and the private sector.

Thank you as always for taking the time to learn more about state government. Please feel free to contact me if I can be of any service to you.

Program Evaluation Division

The Program Evaluation Division was created during this past session by the General Assembly to conduct professional, non-partisan evaluations of programs funded by state tax money. Their work will help determine whether public services are delivered effectively, efficiently and within the law.

Other states, most notably Florida, have similar divisions that audit the effectiveness of state government programs. The division has about 10 employees, all of whom have extensive experience in government and the private sector. All of them have at least a master's degree and several have earned doctorate degrees.

The Program Evaluation Division has already established an ambitious work plan, considering the law creating the division was approved less than 10 months ago.

Before the next session starts in May, the division plans to conduct evaluations of the state's Agriculture Research Stations, its regional economic development partnerships and some of its mental health programs. By the start of next year's session in January, 2009, the division plans to complete work on evaluations of the Alcohol Beverage Control system, court technology, private duty nursing, vehicle safety inspection, water and sewer infrastructure and a second evaluation of mental health. A multi-year evaluation of Department of Transportation management is also planned.

The division is overseen by Joint Legislative Program Evaluation Oversight Committee, which has helped the division during these early months and will continue to work closely with the staff.

Oversight committees

Oversight committees provide a way for lawmakers to monitor areas of state government year-round and are particularly active during the time in-between legislative sessions. The General Assembly usually meets for six to seven months in odd-numbered years and three to four months in even-numbered years. That means that lawmakers are generally in session and able to enact laws for just about half of every two-year term.

They use the time when they are out of session to learn more about state government and to evaluate specific programs and matters of interest.

The oversight committees are set up like most other legislative committees, with the leaders of each chamber appointing members and committee chairs.

Following are summaries of the recent work of some of our key oversight committees:

Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee

Last year the state budgeted more than \$11 billion for our public schools, community colleges and universities. Oversight of the programs and initiatives we have established for education in this state requires a deep commitment, and the members of the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee meet regularly to keep up with developments.

During their meeting last week, several school superintendents came to Raleigh at the request of the committee to discuss how they would improve the services of the Department of Public Instruction. Their comments made it apparent that they are concerned about the organizational structure at DPI and about the licensure process for teachers who come to North Carolina after being licensed to teach in another state.

Those in attendance were:

Dr. Larry Cartner, Superintendent, Person County Schools

Dr. Terry Cline, Superintendent, Lenoir County Schools

Cliff Dodson, Superintendent, Buncombe County Schools

Allen Johnson, Superintendent, Asheville City Schools

Dr. Ethan Lenker, Superintendent, Jones County Schools

Ricky Lopes, Associate Superintendent of Business Operations, Cumberland County Schools

Dr. Katie McGee, Superintendent, Brunswick County Schools

Reeves McGlohon, Superintendent, Gaston County Schools

Howard Lee, chairman of the North Carolina State Board of Education, came to the meeting to discuss public school governance and there were presentations about programs for exceptional children. The committee heard updates on two programs designed to help students from a variety of backgrounds prepare for college and learned about efforts to integrate arts into the public school curriculum.

I am a member of the Education Oversight Committee.

Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Abuse Services

The General Assembly has been working with others for the past several years to reform the mental health system and this oversight committee spends a great deal of time reviewing the issues. At the end of last month, committee members met for about eight hours over two days about a number of matters.

During the meeting, members of the committee received an update on construction projects and local substance-abuse programs and learned more about the Department of Health and Human Services appeals process and crisis services for the developmentally disabled. Health and Human Services Dempsey Benton also came to the hearing for a discussion with lawmakers about the work ahead of all of them.

Joint Legislative Transportation Oversight Committee

Transportation continues to be a challenge as the state's population grows. Within 20 years, North Carolina is expected to add about 3 million more people, bringing the total population to 12 million. This growth will require us to not only improve and expand our road and highway system, but to also expand public transportation.

At its meeting this week, members of the Transportation Oversight Committee spent a great deal of time discussing public transit in Charlotte and in the Research Triangle area. They also learned more about the funding of public transportation projects and received an update on an effort within the Department of Transportation to transform its business model.

Other existing oversight committees for the General Assembly are the:

Joint Legislative Administrative Procedure Oversight Committee
Joint Legislative Committee on Capital Improvements
Joint Legislative Corrections, Crime Control and Juvenile Justice Oversight Committee
Joint Legislative Committee on Domestic Violence (I am the House Chairman of this Committee.)
Joint Legislative Economic Development Oversight Committee
Joint Legislative Health Care Oversight Committee
Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Information Technology
Lottery Oversight Committee

These committees are vital to the work we do in the legislature and help us make sure we protect your investment in state government. It is also important that we hear from you about your concerns and ideas to improve the work we do.