



Representative McLawhorn's News from Raleigh

April 12, 2007

This week continued to move at the steady pace that has been present over the past several weeks. With local bill filing deadlines behind us, my colleagues and I are working diligently to finish our public, appropriations and finance bills as their deadlines are quickly approaching. At the same time, the long process of assembling the House budget is already underway. As a House Education Appropriations Co-Chair, I have been working long hours to see that the needs of our education system are adequately funded throughout the state. While, we are not facing an overwhelming budget shortfall this year, the growing needs of North Carolina's education system continue to make funding a challenge.

I am pleased to be a primary sponsor of several pieces of legislation filed this week. HB1339 would provide additional funding for the North Carolina Institute of Medicine and remove the current cap on the institute's membership. HB1391 would establish a joint legislative study committee on public school funding formulas. Finally, HB1392 would authorize and provide funding for a joint legislative study commission on early childhood programs. In the coming weeks I intend to file additional legislation to improve healthcare and education in North Carolina.

The main budget-writers in the General Assembly asked their fellow lawmakers to trim Gov. Mike Easley's proposed \$20.1 billion budget by about 1 percent. The \$210 million cut would reduce the governor's proposed \$350 million expansion budget by 60 percent. Easley's recommended education budget would be reduced by \$115 million, while the Health and Human Services proposal would lose \$26 million. Part of the reason for the proposed cuts is uncertainty over the state's tax structure. Easley and some members of the House favor keeping a half-cent sales tax and an income tax increase for the state's wealthiest workers – both approved in 2001 – on the books. Other members want to eliminate the taxes, which together generate about \$300 million. As I have said before, my focus on this year's budget will be in the area of education, one of the largest portions of the budget.

The state's drivers will soon be seeing red. Starting April 16, the blue lettering on the state's standard-issue license plates will be replaced with red letters. The Wright brothers' plane and sea grass will remain as the background. The change is the first to North Carolina's standard license plate design in 25 years. North Carolina has had the same standard plate longer than any other state except Delaware, whose plates date to 1962. North Carolina set aside \$1.2 million for the more than 600,000 new plates it plans to distribute during the first year.

The House Transportation committee passed a very popular and highly publicized piece of legislation this week. HB 1277 would allow the revocation of anyone's driver's license who was convicted of giving alcoholic beverages to, or aiding and abetting the purchase or possession of alcoholic beverages by an underage person. This bill would allow for a limited driving privilege for those convicted of this offense. This bill was introduced by several Wake County representatives. Wake County has experienced an alarming number of alcohol-related motor

vehicle fatalities involving underage drivers. This bipartisan legislation was created as a result of these deaths.

A bipartisan group of representatives introduced legislation this week that would give Medicaid relief to the state's counties. Medicaid spending in the state has increased from \$3.1 billion in 1995 to \$8.5 billion in the last fiscal year. During that time, the counties' share of that spending has nearly tripled to about \$450 million. The proposal would cap the counties' contributions to what they spent in the 2005-06 fiscal year and would also allow the state to offer financial help to poor counties or others struggling to pay their share of Medicaid costs.

Some nurses asked the North Carolina Board of Nursing to follow the lead of the state Medical Board by passing an ethics policy that bars its members from taking part in executions. The N.C. Nurses Association plans to discuss the issue later this month, but its position would not bind the licensing board. A nursing board spokesman says the group would have to seek legislation to keep nurses from participating in executions since the board has no authority to discipline its members for ethics violations as the medical board does. The Medical Board's policy has resulted in a de facto death penalty moratorium in the state as the courts seek to resolve the board's stance with a state law that requires doctors to attend executions.

When legislators return to Raleigh next week, we will continue to hear legislation in committees and work diligently on budget appropriations. The House of Representatives will be back in session on Monday at 7pm.