



Representative McLawhorn's News from Raleigh

May 18, 2007

After finishing up our initial work on the budget, my colleagues and I in the House of Representatives turned our focus this week toward hearing the hundreds of bills that need to clear our chamber by next Thursday if they're to be considered during this two-year session. The approaching deadline means busy days and long chamber sessions, but the work we are doing will mean better schools and healthier and safer communities.

As always, please feel free to call or write me if I can be of any help. Thank you for allowing me to share this information with you.

Military

The House passed a bill this week that will better protect the parental rights of military members called to active duty or deployed away from their homes. The bill allows service members who are called to duty to have expedited custody hearings. It also allows for them to speak with a judge by phone during a hearing if they were deployed on short notice. Any custody order issued as a result of a deployment expires within 10 days of the soldier's return, under the new law. It also forbids one parent from mentioning the deployment as a reason to modify or change custody arrangements. The bill is yet another way the House is trying to make our state friendly to those military members who protect us. It now goes to the Senate.

Education

The House Education Subcommittee on Pre-School, Elementary and Secondary Education held its second public hearing recently as part of an initiative to improve high school graduation rates. The audience for the hearing included about a dozen members of the North Carolina House of Representatives, including its chief supporter, Speaker Joe Hackney. Local school administrators, teachers, parents, students, local leaders and concerned citizens also attended. Several shared insights about how to reduce the number of dropouts. I was very proud of the presentation from representatives from Pitt County. The group may hold additional hearings and will then develop guidelines for how to award grants to pilot programs that may reduce the dropout rate. The budget proposed by the House includes \$7 million for dropout prevention programs.

Justice

A bill approved by the House on Wednesday would require North Carolina law enforcement agencies to record all homicide interrogations, either by audio or video devices. The bill, unopposed by both the N.C. Conference of District Attorneys and the N.C. Sheriff's Association, is designed to reduce contestation of cases because of the interrogation process. The recording must be uninterrupted and also may be refused. If it is, that refusal must be recorded. A survey of 500 law enforcement agencies using the tactic found lower litigation costs, decreased number

of issues raised in appeals and an increase of cases ending in plea agreements rather than trial. The bill now goes to the Senate.

The House passed a bill unanimously Tuesday that would require adults over the age of 54 to get a driver's license that expires within five years instead of eight years. The bill is designed to ensure safe driving practices. An amendment to raise the cutoff age to 65 failed.

Election Laws

North Carolinians currently vote in the presidential primaries in May of the election year. State legislators, saying the primary elections are essentially decided at that point in the year, want that to change. A new measure being considered in the Legislature would change the primaries to February, effective for the 2008 elections.

A new bill would change the way North Carolina casts its electoral votes in national elections. The current method gives all the state's 15 electoral votes to the candidate with the most votes within the state. Some say this causes federal candidates to ignore North Carolina and focus intensive media campaigns on a few swing states. The bill proposes giving the electoral votes to the winner of the national popular vote. The bill passed the Senate this week, and it will likely go before the House next week.

Health

A bill banning smoking in long term healthcare facilities passed the House unanimously Tuesday. It was introduced following a deadly fire in March at an adult-care facility in Mocksville. The fire, caused by a resident smoking in her room, resulted in one death and 21 injuries. The bill will affect tens of thousands of North Carolina citizens either living or receiving medical care in the 635 adult care homes, 644 family care homes and 392 nursing homes licensed by the state. The bill is expected to improve the safety and health of residents and workers in the facilities.

A driver's license does not currently serve as a valid indication of a person's wish to be an organ donor. A new bill would change that, making the notice on driver's licenses adequate legal notice of a person's intentions regarding organ donation. The bill passed the House 117-1. It now goes to the Senate.

The House will be back in session on Monday at 7pm.

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