



Representative McLawhorn's News from Raleigh

June 8, 2007

The pace in the House of Representatives picked up this week as our committees considered measures sent from the Senate. We also began having our first conference committee meetings on the budget. These meetings will help us craft a final budget to be sent to Governor Mike Easley. I am proud to have been appointed a budget conferee by Speaker Joe Hackney. This appointment allows me to represent my colleagues in the house and to make sure my constituents and citizens throughout North Carolina are well served by this year's budget. Negotiators hope to have a final budget approved by July 1, the beginning of the next fiscal year.

Budget

The General Assembly began final budget negotiations this week. Both the House and the Senate have approved roughly \$20 billion budget proposals that invest heavily in education and economic development. Conference committees appointed by the leaders of each chamber will work out the differences in the plans. I have been appointed as a conferee representing education appropriations.

Matters eligible for negotiation include pay raises for state employees, the statewide sales tax rate, and the income tax rate for the highest wage earners in the state. The House proposed a 4.25 percent pay raise for state employees, a quarter-percent more than the Senate provided in their version of the budget. The Senate wants to trim a quarter-percent from the sales tax and the income tax rate for the wealthy. The House has proposed keeping both taxes unchanged.

House Speaker Joe Hackney has also committed to a \$15 million dollar appropriation for the dental school at East Carolina University.

Public Safety

Cigarettes that burn out safely when left unattended would be required in North Carolina under legislation approved in a House committee this week. Similar legislation has been approved in more than a dozen states and Canada, according to the Coalition for Fire-Safe Cigarettes. The group says cigarettes are the leading reason for fire deaths in the United States, causing up to 900 deaths a year. The state Division of Public Health stated that cigarettes and similar smoking material accounted for 700,500 residential fires in the state in 2005. Those fires resulted in 100 deaths and 800 injuries. The bill (HB1785) now goes to the House Finance Committee.

HB 1755, Coordinate Statewide Enhanced 911 System, passed its final reading Thursday. This important legislation will provide funds to modernize and improve North Carolina's 911 system. The current system does not adequately serve citizens in all localities. This legislation will bring this invaluable service up to par across our state.

Environment

A bill to require North Carolina power companies to use more renewable fuels and encourage energy efficiency received a public hearing this week before a House committee. The bill (HB77) would require the utilities to get at least 20 percent of their electricity by 2021 through renewable sources, such as wind, solar or water.

State agencies could no longer use oyster shells in landscaping or highway beautification projects if the Senate agrees to changes in a bill (SB1453) approved in the House this week. State agencies are trying to increase awareness of oyster shell recovery efforts. The state has already banned shells from landfills and is working to establish oyster hatcheries at the state's aquariums. North Carolina oyster stocks have dropped about 90 percent since 1900, and old shells provide the best habitat for young oysters.

Election

A measure that would allow people to register and immediately vote at one-stop sites up to three days before an election is making its way through the Senate. Supporters say the bill (HB91) would encourage more people to vote. Existing law cuts off voter registration 25 days before an election. The measure now goes to the full Senate.

Health

The House Aging Committee has approved legislation that would lead to a rating system for adult-care homes. The ratings would be based on inspections, complaint investigations and penalties imposed by state regulators. The bill (HB248) now goes to the House Appropriations Committee. Supporters hope it will eventually create a star system similar to the one used for day cares, which awards the centers one to five stars, with five being the highest.

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

###