



Representative McLawhorn's News from Raleigh

December 5, 2007

Our country has become increasingly concerned in recent years with protecting our citizens. We all want to keep our families and loved ones safe, and this session we passed several laws to protect North Carolinians, particularly children and those who may not always be able to protect themselves.

Thank you for allowing me to share this information with you. Feel free to let me know if I can help you in any way.

Protect Children from Sex Offenders

We have improved sex offender registration requirements and prohibited sex offenders from living close to schools and education centers. This session we continued to protect our children from sex offenders by passing a law to further protect against child pornographers. The bill (HB 27) requires computer technicians who find images of minors engaging in sexual activity to report the name of the person who owns the computer to the proper authorities. The bill also requires photo developers to report child pornography to the proper authorities.

Our budget includes almost \$330,000 for two agents who will work full-time investigating child exploitation and sexual predator cases. An additional \$247,500 will help us operate a sex offender registry.

The General Assembly ratified and Gov. Easley signed a law that will provide better monitoring of violent sex offenders. The bill (HB 29) requires recidivist and violent sex offenders to enroll in a GPS monitoring system for life. If a sex offender does not fall into one of these categories, the Department of Correction will conduct a risk assessment to determine if he or she should enroll in the monitoring program.

Gang and Gang Violence Prevention

Gang violence is a serious issue in our country. Keeping children in school is crucial to reducing the number of young people involved in gangs. Along with initiatives focusing on dropout prevention, we will reduce gangs and gang violence by increasing the criminal penalties for gang activity and promoting prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation programs in our schools and communities. We approved \$4.8 million in grants that will be awarded to government agencies and community groups working on gang violence prevention, intervention, and suppression.

Speaker Hackney recently appointed members to a special House Select Committee on Street Gang Prevention. Representative Michaux will chair the committee and I am very pleased to be a member.

Domestic Violence

This session we expanded and strengthened domestic violence laws in our state. We implemented the recommendations of the newly created Joint Legislative Committee on Domestic Violence and provided safer environments for victims at court hearings. One bill (HB 46) provides secure areas in courthouses for victims waiting for their trials to be heard. Another bill (HB 47) makes it a felony to violate a protective order related to a domestic violence case while in possession of a deadly weapon. Our budget includes \$147,000 to enforce the second law.

We tightened up domestic violence laws by ratifying a bill (HB 42) that adds stalking to the list of reasons a magistrate can hold a suspected abuser in jail. In addition, we increased funding for rape and crisis assault services by appropriating \$894,000 to improve community-based programs for domestic violence victims.

A new law will help keep victims of domestic violence safe. The General Assembly ratified a bill (SB 30) that will make it easier for a victim of domestic violence, sexual offense, or stalking to change their name. The new law exempts these victims from the 10-day waiting period to legally change a name and states that these cases are not a matter of public record.

Safer Roads

We will protect people on roads by strengthening speeding laws. The General Assembly ratified and Gov. Easley signed a bill (SB 925) that will stop drivers speeding at more than 25 mph over the posted speed limit from claiming that their speedometer was broken. These speeders will also be ineligible for a disposition of prayer for judgment continued. A prayer for judgment continued means that the person is guilty of the offense, but no sentence is imposed.

The General Assembly ratified and Gov. Easley signed a law dealing with decreasing underage drinking and drunken driving. The bill (SB 999) gives the court the authority to secure custody of a juvenile if he or she is charged with underage drinking or driving while impaired and is considered to be a danger to others.

Convicted drunken drivers will be allowed to wear alcohol-monitoring ankle bracelets under a bill (SB 1290) that was ratified this session. The bill has been signed into law. The bracelets would cost \$12 a day, some of which would be paid by the convicted drivers. Some questioned whether it was fair to adopt use of the devices, since some people could not afford their use. However, supporters argued that counties may be willing to bear the cost since the bracelets would help keep drunken drivers off the road and be less expensive than jail.

Safer Health Care Facilities

This session we passed a law that will increase penalties for harming patients in health care facilities. The bill (HB 554) makes it a felony to cause bodily injury to a patient or resident of a health care or residential care facility.

Fire-Safe Cigarettes

Cigarettes that burn out safely when left unattended are now required in North Carolina under a new law (HB 1785). Similar legislation has been approved in more than a dozen states and Canada. The Coalition for Fire-Safe Cigarettes 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 blamed cigarettes and similar smoking material for 700,500 residential fires in the state in 2005. Those fires resulted in 100 deaths and 800 injuries.

Protect Animals

People who purposely kill a police animal or an assistance animal, such as a seeing-eye dog, will be committing a felony under a bill (SB 34) we ratified and Gov. Mike Easley signed this session. The bill makes it a felony to kill such animals and makes the death an aggravating factor when determining punishment for another crime.