

Lisa's Legislative Lingo



Ninth Update

2010

Only two weeks remain before First Adjournment, so this was the last week for committees to pass out bills. However, bills that were never worked may still find a way onto legislation as amendments or provisos.

Next week the House will be on the floor all day Monday through Wednesday in an effort to get as much done as possible before the end of the regular session. We will not convene on the floor Thursday and Friday, although conference committees will continue to meet.

Things tend to move quickly in the last two weeks before Drop Dead Day, as any bill that has not passed both House and Senate chambers can no longer be debated after this deadline (although certain bills, such as the budget, are exempt). I will keep you posted as we work through important legislation.

House Republican leaders propose \$200 million in cuts to public schools

Despite the fact that the budget has been dramatically cut six times in the last 18 months, the majority party continues to assert that Kansas has a spending problem, not a revenue problem. Ten weeks into the legislative session, House Republican leadership finally offered an FY 2011 budget proposal. They have rejected any change in tax policy as a means of filling a projected \$400+ million budget gap. This means they must fill the hole with \$400+ million in additional cuts.

For months, the public has called on these legislators to make public what they feel can afford to go on the chopping block. The House GOP unveiled their proposal on Thursday, which cuts approximately \$361 million from essential state services, in addition to \$200 million in cuts to Kansas public school districts. Here are some key components of the proposal:

- \$200 million in additional cuts to Kansas public education;
- \$5-7 million in additional cuts for mental health programs impacting 90,000 Kansans who need mental health assistance;
- A 5% across the board salary cut to all state employees (there is also a proposal to begin closing state offices at 3:00 p.m. on Fridays, which is essentially a 12-day furlough);

- \$37.9 million freeze on KPERS employer contributions;
- 1% cut in all state agency budgets, resulting in more layoffs and service cuts;
- Increased premiums for children's health insurance.

Of course this is a difficult year and tough choices are inevitable. However, just two days before announcing this proposal, House Republican leadership attempted to push through over \$350 million in corporate tax breaks. I don't believe that is in the best interest of Kansas families and communities. These cuts will cost much more in long-term damage than they will ever save in FY 2011.

In the past, we have always worked through the budget process in a bipartisan manner. The full Appropriations committee would thoroughly review subcommittee recommendations and engage in extensive debate from both sides of the aisle. That certainly has not been the procedure for the last two years. After 67 days with no proposal from the majority party, this plan was passed out of committee on a straight party line vote, after about an hour of discussion.

While I am deeply concerned about the proposed cuts, the budget debate is just getting started. This proposal will go to the House floor for full consideration early next week, at which point we will have opportunities to add amendments. The bill could also be voted down altogether and sent back to the drawing board. Whatever passes must be reconciled with the Senate budget bill and signed by the Governor. We will then reconvene in late April- after the most recent revenue estimates are announced- to make more adjustments through the Omnibus Budget. We have a long way to go.

Tax Debate Tuesday

Early this week, a number of different tax proposals went to the floor for consideration. The debate began with House Bill 2549, a bill that sought to raise taxes by removing exemptions to the state sales tax. The legislation was eventually gutted after passing several amendments that changed the initial intent of the bill.

Before taking a final vote, a motion was made to table the bill until May 3rd, when the Legislature reconvenes for Veto Session. At that time, new revenue estimates will provide a better picture of the budget gap and allow for a more accurate assessment as to what revenues will be needed. The motion passed 64-57.

Majority Leadership argued that the debate on taxes was necessary to examine whether there was enough support to pass a tax increase. This argument is less than sincere. These revenue bills were brought to the floor before any FY 2011 budget proposals had been advanced out of the House Appropriations Committee. It has never been the tradition of the Legislature to consider revenue proposals before a budget bill is presented, or before April estimates confirm what revenues will be needed. It is both irresponsible and unfair to ask taxpayers to blindly throw extra money into a pot, which is why I supported the motion to table the bill. The entire debate was a game of political hot potato, not a genuine dialogue about tax policy.

Throughout the course of Tuesday's debate, many House Republicans voted to double the state deficit by attempting to push through over \$350 million in tax breaks for wealthy citizens and corporations. This debate was clearly not about filling the budget gap.

I have said all along that compromise will be the key to balancing the budget. We certainly can't tax our way out of this financial crisis, but too many Kansans depend on public services for us to cut our way out either. The deficit can only be eliminated with a healthy balance of what the state needs to survive this difficult time, what we can afford in the current economic climate, and what Kansas communities are willing to invest in their future. "Healthy balance" was nowhere present in the House of Representatives this week. When leadership is ready to engage in that discussion, I will be there to protect the best interests of you, your family, and our community.

State Employees share concerns with legislators

More than 250 members of the Kansas Organization of State Employees (KOSE) came to the Statehouse on Wednesday to visit with legislators. Since state employees receive their paychecks directly from the State of Kansas, their jobs, wages, and retirement are directly linked to what happens in the Capitol.

It is important to remember that "Kansas government" is not a conglomeration of faceless agencies, organizations, and bureaucrats. State employees work in every county of Kansas. They work in agencies that keep our state running efficiently. They include social workers, psychologists, mental health techs, correctional officers, transportation workers and investigators, to name a few. They earn much less than their counterparts in the private sector. Their work keeps you safe and provides the basic services that you depend on every day.

Unlike the private sector, demand skyrockets in the public sector when times are tough. Unfortunately, Kansas is near the bottom in state employee wages. In 2007, research found that 1 in every 3 state employees were more than 25% below market. Their paychecks have remained stagnant for several years as the cost of living has significantly increased. The Legislature made a promise to these 40,000 workers that we would make market adjustments to their salaries over a five-year period. The current budget proposal breaks that promise by suspending \$6.4 million in state employee longevity payments.

Over 300 mental health advocates warn against further cuts

On Thursday, approximately 300 people arrived in Topeka for the Kansas Mental Health Coalition's Mental Health Advocacy Day. The group is an umbrella coalition of more than 30 organizations that represent consumers of mental health services, their family, community mental health centers, individual providers of mental health services, advocacy organizations, and child welfare providers. The coalition advocates for public services for the uninsured and underinsured, psychiatric inpatient needs, geriatric mental health, and other issues that impact Kansans with mental illness.

Many of these organizations operate under a state mandate to serve everyone who walks through their doors, regardless of a patient's inability to pay. As a result, they heavily rely upon Medicaid funding to provide the treatment and care of Kansans in need. They have been

deeply impacted by the 10 percent Medicaid cut imposed by the Governor in November. The coalition specifically lobbied for the restoration of that funding in FY 2011.

It is in the best, long-term interest of the state to care for Kansans with mental illness. Without treatment, many will end up in contact with law enforcement, hospital emergency rooms, or state psychiatric hospitals. All of those alternatives cost the state much more than the cost of services that these organizations provide.

Public schoolchildren, teachers rally for education funding

Approximately 1,000 teachers, students and parents from across the state took advantage of Spring Break last Tuesday by marching to the Capitol to protest further cuts to public schools. Gov. Mark Parkinson and other state officials were present. They encouraged the education community to keep pushing lawmakers to protect public as they work through the FY 2011 budget.

Education funding has been slashed by at least \$300 million (about 10 percent) over the last year. This is even after Kansas received hundreds of millions of dollars from the federal government for education funding in the 2009 stimulus bill. As a result, teachers are being laid off, classes and extracurricular programs are being eliminated, class sizes are going up, and schools are closing.

Regardless of the economic climate, the Legislature has a constitutional obligation to fund quality public schools. Deeper cuts to education this year would be devastating to the Shawnee Mission School District (as well as local economies) and terribly short-sighted for the future of Kansas. Children only get one shot at K-12 education. It will take years to recover from the damage schools have already endured as a result of funding shortages. More cuts will do an enormous disservice to an entire generation of Kansans. Those Kansans will be taking charge of this state right about the time that many of us will retire and depend on their leadership. Furthermore, no matter what type of tax breaks we offer business, how can we grow the economy of Kansas if we are unable to provide a highly trained, educated workforce?

Public education is not an "expense." It is one of the most critical investments we make in ourselves, our families, and our communities. Every single Kansas citizen benefits from a strong public school system.

Two days after the rally, legislators unveiled a budget proposal that cuts public schools by an additional \$200 million. I will not support these additional cuts.

Keep in Touch

It is a special honor to serve as your state representative. I value and need your input on the various issues facing state government. Please feel free to contact me with your comments and questions. You can reach me in Topeka through the Johnson County offices (thanks to the county commissioners) at 715-5000 and ask for my Topeka office. Or you may call the legislative hotline at 1-800-432-3924 to leave a message for me. Additionally, you can e-mail me at Lisa.Benlon@yahoo.com or at Lisa.Benlon@house.ks.gov during the legislative session.