

LWVWY Legislative Report #9, March 15, 2021

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A record spring snowstorm shut down the state government for at least Monday, with the amount of snow that will have to be removed to get state workers and the Legislature back to work. The skipping of a legislative day(s) means deadlines will land on different calendar days. Stay tuned.

When legislators return, the snowstorm will be only one of the monumental issues before them. The major task is a supplemental budget bill to take us through the biennium, June 30, 2022. The Joint Appropriations Committee presented the Legislature with a package of draconian cuts at the start of the 2021 session, but our fiscal outlook has improved enough since then that amendments added last week actually restored several items, proposed by Appropriations members themselves. Take, for instance, House 2nd reading amendment #35, with a list of restorations to Health Department programs that people really needed.

The House and Senate will hear what the other chamber did to the mirror bills and will send conference committee members off to work out a compromise that both chambers can approve. The deadline for that conference committee report is Day 27.

Budget debates consumed time and mental energy last week, so many bills are just where they were at this time last week.

The House and Senate have drastically competing versions of education funding bills. HB173 in the House includes a provisional sales tax and phases in a cut of about \$30 million a year. Other features include: larger class sizes, school nurses, health insurance for actual hires and a temporary increase in reserves. Sen. Scott wrote SF143 to phase in cuts of \$100 million over three years, pleasing the chorus of legislators who want schools to share more pain. HB173 has a greater chance of passing constitutional muster, if anyone is thinking about that.

Education continues to generate novel ideas. A proposed constitutional amendment (on Senate General File) would remove the state from scoring and replacing deficient schools and instead give the state the role of supplementing local bond issues. SF138 School board trustees would permit people to list political affiliation on the ballot as they seek this nonpartisan office. The sponsor, Sen. Ellis, told the Senate Education Committee she wants to help the clueless voter with some useful information. Sen. Biteman said he thought an "R" or "D" might reveal the kind of trustee who would go around supporting a tax for education. It would inject partisanship and party loyalty in an office that is supposed to be focused on only one thing, and that is school children. The real solution for the uninformed voter is ready access to LWV guides.

The education debate is resulting in some new thinking about sources of revenue, the proper use of the so-called "rainy day" Legislative Stabilization Reserve Account (LSRA), how we might redirect some revenue streams from inviolate funds and into liquid "reserve accounts." A third reading amendment to HB1 would split revenue from the statutory 1 percent severance tax

between the reserve accounts of the Common School Land Fund and the Permanent Mineral Trust Fund. In other words, is this the time to be saving when current needs are urgent?

HB75 Voter identification sailed through the House and now is in the Senate, ready for introduction and assignment to committee. In addition to all the arguments against HB75 – which LWVWY President Susan Simpson has articulated so well – we can add the waste of time on ineffectual gestures that consume resources and don't improve election integrity. Whether the barrier it creates is big or small, it achieves nothing but more work for voters and poll workers. We should continue to send messages or call our senator to reject this idea.

A runoff election bill, SF145, won approval in Senate Corporations and is on General File in the Senate. It turns out only a handful of statewide races ever produce results where the primary winner gets a plurality. The 2000 governor's election is one. County clerks said the scheduling of an extra election would be virtually impossible, especially as they struggle to organize things during a redistricting year. However, the committee tossed around the idea of ranked choice voting as a way to handle the issue. Clerks testified they had the time, equipment and programs to handle ranked choice. The committee attached a \$1.5 million appropriation. Anyone interested in an interim study of ranked choice voting?

Two major LWVWY issues are on General File in the Senate this week: SF154 Medicaid expansion and SF150 Death penalty repeal. Please include Majority Floor Leader Ogden Driskill in your messages of support. He is the one who scheduled General File. A modified Medicaid expansion bill in the House, HB162, had been scheduled for a committee hearing this week, but we'll see when the new meeting lists come out.

Two bills with health order restrictions are still alive and moving. HB127 Public Health Amendments was selected by House Corporations to advance for consideration. A health officer could control movements of sick people, but orders that prevent transmission would be time limited and require local or legislative approval. SF80 Public Health Orders is passed the Senate and in the House. It subjects health orders to public comment and then local or legislative approval. Meanwhile, SF30 (Pandemic response review task force) narrowly passed the Senate and is in the House. This approach is favored by the governor and the county commissioners.

HB218 Bias motivated crime received strong testimony in the House Judiciary last week, including from students from the University of Wyoming and Cody High School. Opponents worried it would stifle speech. However, the bill would apply only to sentencing of people convicted of very serious crimes. Ultimately, the committee decided to seek an interim study.

Find copious information about bills and contact information for legislators on wyoleg.gov.

If you have any questions about finding meetings, documents or other aspects of the legislative process, please contact me. Margaret Brown also is eager to help people navigate the Legislature. If you plan to attend any part of the session in person I will be glad to help, as well.

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