

2015 Legislative Update No. 10 from Ron Highland, Representative of the 51st District

Several bills were passed by the House this week. Most of them were non-controversial bills amending laws to update and/or remove inconsistent language. Committees were busy finishing their assigned bills and working bills referred from the Senate. Things will get interesting from this point forward. Bills passed by both chambers have differences and will be referred to a conference committee. Normally the chair, vice-chair, and the minority leader of each committee are assigned to meet with their counterparts from the Senate to discuss and come to an agreement on the language of bills. Then both chambers must agree on the compromise before it is forwarded to the Governor. This is the stage where “gut and go”, bundling, and other maneuvers take place.

Appropriations passed the “mega budget” out of committee. We will debate the bill in the House next week. This is the beginning of the long debate on what we authorize to spend and when done (not anytime soon), we will look at the revenues to date and determine what, if any, tax law changes need to be made.

The Tax Committee heard testimony on several bills designed for possible ways to raise more revenue. As expected, there was vigorous opposition testimony to each. Topics included excise tax on renewable energy and ethanol production, and property tax on renewable energy sites. We also heard presentations on tax exemptions. There are currently about 90 entities that are receiving tax exempt status.

The Education Committee made the news twice this week. The first was when we worked HB 2139 – In state tuition for undocumented individuals. What was to be a discussion of law turned into an animated discussion on ethnicity. We were called racists, bigots, and sexists; those comments later clarified to include anyone who would support such a bill. In actuality, the bill was about Kansas Law vs. Federal Law. Federal law says undocumented individuals may not receive in-state tuition. Current Kansas law says otherwise. I contend that those colleges, universities, and social groups who strongly support giving in-state tuition could easily form a foundation to cover the approximately \$2.5 million dollars per year currently being funded by the Kansas taxpayers. The bill was tabled after lengthy debate.

HB 2292 was also worked. It too was an emotional issue and the debate lasted over two hours. Many Kansans are very concerned that a system of instruction was initiated by the State School Board and Governor Parkinson without legislative oversight. It began with a multi-state compact (contract) without Senate approval that included commitment to fund new text materials and yearly testing requirements. These were commitments that require funding by the Legislature which they did not have the opportunity to approve. I asked the Attorney General’s office for an opinion on the constitutionality of both the compact and the commitment to funding. The Attorney General’s Office denied my request for an opinion.

Kansas law states that the districts will select the text books and materials they will use for instruction. However, the selection of texts and materials available for the districts to choose from are limited due to the compact agreements made. When we passed the block grant, the intent was to return maximum control of schools back to the local level. I would encourage all parents to visit their schools and ask to

review the materials being used to teach their children and the tests provided by electronic means. You are responsible and have the power to change your schools if you believe change is needed. Local control means exactly that.

I have seen, heard, and read many conflicting reports about the proposed school funding, House Sub for SB 7. For this reason, I have placed the funding spreadsheet data for the school districts in our area on my web-site, www.ronhighland.com, under the Issues tab. The spreadsheets were copied directly from the Kansas Department of Education's web site. Please review for the appropriations they received for 2013 – 2014, and will receive for 2015 – 2017. There is an increase in funding for each year and the ability to apply for more money should there be a large increase in enrollment or other unforeseen need arise. It is unfortunate that teachers, parents, and students have been needlessly alarmed into thinking otherwise. We are assuming the funding bill will be signed into law by the Governor.

I was thrilled to have the Wamego FFA Officer Team as pages along with their advisor, Mr. Andy Morton. The students who spent the day at the Capitol were Blyth Wagner, Marissa Colson, Rachelle Wylie, Keith Zerbe, Peyton Freeman, and Morgan Riat. I enjoyed what little time I had to visit with them and we all had our picture taken with the Governor. Other visitors included Dr. Ralph Richardson, Dean of the KSU College of Veterinary Medicine, and Bill Persinger, Director of the Mental Health Center of East Central Kansas. This week I also enjoyed attending the Kansas Prayer Breakfast, and the Rossville Community Foundation dinner and fundraiser. It was my honor to Chair my first Committee of the Whole in the House one day this week.

You can read the bills in their entirety by going to the legislative web site, <http://www.kslegislature.org/li/>. If you need help navigating the site you can go to my web site, www.ronhighland.com where there is a syllabus that explains in detail how to get the information you need. My contact information is: 785-296-7310; Rm 561 W, State Capitol, Topeka, Kansas, 66612; and ron.highland@house.ks.gov. It is an honor and a privilege to serve you.