

Legislative Update No. 4, February 3, 2017

The celebration for Kansas Day continued Monday with introduction in the House of Dr. Richard Bergren, sculptor of the Ad Astra statue on the Capitol dome. He personally spent twenty years doing his own fundraising to complete the project. Home on the Range was sung by all the House Representatives, and a movie portraying the history of our famous state song was shown throughout the day.

Our work has begun in earnest. Committees are hearing and working bills. Just for review; bills referred to committees are first “heard,” and then “worked.” The hearing is where any interested person has the right to be heard on the topic of the bill. Their voice can be in person at the hearing or they may submit written testimony. Committee members will ask questions during the hearing of the presenters so they will have the information in hand if, or when the bill is worked. The purpose of the hearing is to educate the committee members. If the bill is worked, that is when the committee meets to discuss the bill. At this point, the public is no longer involved. The members will listen to other members reasoning to vote either for or against the bill. Questions of legality are answered by the attorney assigned to the committee and any questions on additional research are answered by the researcher assigned to the committee. In the end, the vote of the committee decides whether to forward the bill to the full House for consideration.

Several bills were passed by the House of Representatives this week. They were generally non-controversial bills that were technical in nature and had very limited debate. We will be dealing with bills on the floor of the House starting next week that will be controversial for some members and the debate will become more lively. I enjoy this phase because at times it brings up points for which I needed more clarification. As always, a decision is only as good as the information it is based upon.

My week was very busy, especially with emails coming in at the rate of 10 – 20 per hour during the day concerning primarily the gun bills or calling for a constitutional convention. Because I am the chair of the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules and Regulations, I am also on the State Rules and Regulations Board. The Board met this week during the lunch hour to consider emergency approval of a regulation developed by the Department of Corrections.

Two bills I introduced in Federal and State Affairs were heard on Tuesday. HB 2102 – Board of county commissioner’s meetings, simply changes the law to allow the county to designate what day of the week to meet. Current law requires the first Monday of the month. I testified in favor and Pottawatomie County Commissioner Travis Altenhofen testified in writing. The second bill was HCR 5004 – Constitutional amendment granting counties home rule powers. I entered this bill on behalf of Riley County. If passed it would give the counties the same powers as municipalities in the Kansas Constitution. Myself, Riley County Commissioner Ron Wells, and Riley County Counselor Clancy Holeman all testified in favor of the bill.

The rest of the week was spent on the topic of guns. The largest audience attended the hearing on HB 2042 – Concealed carry licensure amendments under the personal and family protection act. If enacted this amendment removes the date for implementation of the current law for Universities in Kansas. HB 2081 – Public employer liability for public employees carrying a concealed handgun, was heard. HB 2150 – Prohibiting the carrying of concealed firearms in certain buildings, was brought by the University of Kansas Medical Center in KC, KS to cover the medical buildings.

The Transportation Committee heard two bills where it was difficult to hear the emotional testimonies. The first was HB 2010 – Prohibiting the operation of a motor vehicle while using a wireless communication device. A mother brought her son who is now disabled from an accident and testified concerning the use of a cell phone while driving. The second was HB 2016 – People with certain disabilities; motor vehicle registration information and notation on state-issued identification cards. The father of an autistic man who was shot and killed by a policeman after a traffic stop testified. Both bills will take time to discuss and contemplate the long-range ramifications, to include discussing with my constituents. HB 2095 – Providing a special vehicle permit for certain vehicle combinations, allows a third axle on trucks and raises the weight limit.

The Agriculture Committee held hearings on four bills. HB 2097 – Amending the Kansas pet animal act; HB 2191 – Relating to licenses, permits, stamps and other issues of the Kansas department of wildlife, parks and tourism; HB 2192 – Renaming Lake Scott state park; and HB 2193 – Requiring the completion of a boater safety education course.

The Tax and Appropriations Committees are still discussing several options for revising the tax code, and looking for areas to cut expenses. There is nothing yet to report from the House on these issues. Word over the weekend is that the Senate is putting forward a plan for taxes.

The week also included several visitors. I had meetings with Craig McCullah and Brandon Smith, Treasurer and Chair, respectively, of the Shawnee County Republican Party. Rosemary Helms and Rick Hernandez from Wamego Community Health Ministries came by to discuss the needs within our population and trends for the future. Cheryl Mermis, Administrative Officer of the Kansas Board of Veterinary Examiners stopped by to update me on activities in that organization. (I worked through the legislative process to bring this Veterinary agency back to Wamego.) Alice Weingartner from GraceMed Health Center of Topeka also visited with me about community health matters.

Thursday was a big day. I was honored to have as my guests, members of the morning coffee group from Wamego. Those who made the trip were: Bill Stallard, Roy Bruna, Tom Beem, John C. Peterson, Mark Portell, Donald Riffey, Sr., and Ron Boerner. Our morning began with coffee in my office, they attended a committee meeting, accompanied me on the floor of the House, and we had lunch together. They then toured the Capitol. While walking between meetings we met the Governor and they had their picture taken with him. Hopefully, all had as good a time, I know I did. Then we were off to Abilene where Bret Baier of Fox News did his evening show live from the Eisenhower Museum. Linda and I were invited to attend where we not only witnessed the show and met Mr. Baier, but also were given a tour of the museum by Mr. Merrill Atwater, Ike's great grandson and currently the Director of Aviation within KDOT.

At my website, www.ronhighland.com, you can find a syllabus that explains in detail how to get the legislative information you need. My contact information is: Rm 561 W, State Capitol, Topeka, Kansas, 66612; and ron.highland@house.ks.gov. My office assistant Lisa can take a message or arrange an appointment by calling 785-296-7310. It is an honor and a privilege to serve you.