

Legislative Update No. 4, February 24, 2018

The best way to relate what the last two weeks have been like is to liken them to boot camp or finals week. We were reading bills, receiving phone calls, emails, and visitors with their recommendations on specific bills. All the committees were very busy hearing and working the bills of merit to pass out of committee with recommendation for approval. They were then submitted to the full House for consideration. Not all bills eventually make it to the floor for full debate and vote. The leadership makes decisions on all bills submitted as to whether they merit that final step in the House. At this point in the process, a legislator or legislators who feel strongly that their bill warrants the final debate will lobby leadership for their bill to be heard.

I did in fact lobby to have a bill heard that I have worked on for three years. Transportation directors of school districts requested HB 2040. They asked that the fines be raised for passing a stopped school bus with the stop sign extended and lights flashing. Because of an increase in drivers ignoring the law it greatly endangers the embarking or debarking children. They also asked for permission to use cameras to capture the event and use it in identifying and charging the individual for the crime. After a great deal of wrangling with the attorneys in the legislature, that permission for use of cameras in the bill was removed. The attorneys stated that the use of cameras is a local jurisdiction decision and already exists in law. I am happy to report the bill passed out of the House unanimously.

There are bills that committee chairpersons feel are too important to die at this point. They request the bills be “blessed” to live on. A blessing is achieved by having a bill referred to an exempt committee, of which there are three (Appropriations, Tax, and Federal & State Affairs). Then the bill is promptly referred back to the original committee. Several bills were blessed and will be worked during the second half of the session.

Seventy-six bills ultimately passed during the last two weeks. The committees met for the last time on Monday, February 19. Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday we were on the floor all day and into the evenings debating bills and voting whether to pass on to final action. A few bills did not get enough votes to pass on for final action, which was completed around 7:30 p.m. February 22.

This concludes the first half of the session, known as turnaround, where all bills passed out of each chamber are then carried over to the other chamber for their consideration of the proposed legislation. Each chamber then begins again with committee meetings to consider the other chamber’s bills. Some bills are the same with just a Senate number on them and require very little work. Because the House has more members, the number of bills sent to the Senate is greater, making their last half of the session busier than ours. Not all bills will make it through the other chamber. Some will be altered and then a conference committee of members from both houses is assigned to compromise on differences. The entire process is laborious, interesting, and at times even fun. It was designed this way by the framers to make it difficult to pass legislation affecting so many lives. It works.

At 7:30 one morning I arranged for representatives of Caterpillar and the city of Wamego to have a breakfast meeting with members of both the House and Senate Transportation Committees. Merl Page, Wamego City Manager; and James Halloran, Manager, State Government. Affairs both gave presentations on the importance of infrastructure to the present and future needs of the Wamego area and business development. Specifically, Highway 99 and the bypass in Wamego were discussed. My purpose for the meeting was to emphasize the importance of the construction projects for our area. There is competition for projects and educating other legislators is a part of serving this area. It is working, because some legislators are saying to me that ours should be placed at the top of the list when funds become available. Our businesses in Wamego are that important to our state.

Linda and I attended the annual Kansas Chamber Awards Banquet and were honored to be seated with the Wamego Caterpillar folks. John Stossel was the featured speaker. It was interesting to hear how a liberal journalist became a true Libertarian as he exposed inefficiencies in government. "When government becomes big, we become small and it crowds out good things," he said.

The Kansas Independent Colleges and Universities held an informative event. They graduate 20% of the total college graduates in Kansas each year, with 79.2% graduating in four years, compared to 52.7% in public institutions.

Each year the Kansas Association of Community College Trustees recognizes the Kansas All-State Academic Team of Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society at a banquet. Paula Serb, Wamego, from Highland Community College. received this honor. Her mother Sharlee was present for the special occasion.

Visitors were Aimee Fowler, Lyle Berges, and John Lang, North Central Flint Hills Area Agency on Aging; Deanna Hall and Cindy Donahow, Pawnee Mental Health; and Bill D. Persinger, Jr., Valeo Behavioral Health Care.

Stacie Elliott, St George, came to visit and we were interested in her involvement in 4-H as well as her future plans. She was part of the Kansas 4-H Youth Leadership Council, an impressive, well dressed, youth group who spent two days at the Capitol conducting model legislation, serving, and speaking with legislators.

We attended the Kansas Republican Party convention in Wichita February 16 and 17. It was my honor to speak to the 1st District delegation about agriculture and state finances. Todd Starnes was the keynote speaker.

It is my honor to represent you and keep you informed with my newsletters. At my website, www.ronhighland.com, you can find a syllabus that explains in detail how to get legislative information. My contact information is: Rm 561 W, State Capitol, Topeka, Kansas 66612; 785-296-7310; ron.highland@house.ks.gov. I look forward to hearing from you.