

The week began with quick action by committees and picked up speed as the week progressed. The Senate passed out three bills dealing with taxes and the Governor's rescission bill. The rescission bill is a bill sent to the legislature by the Governor that rescinds or changes in part or whole the previous budget bill passed by the legislature and signed by the Governor. It proposes changes to make balancing the budget for the current year possible. The Senate plan was to debate on the floor all day on Thursday, but when they gaveled in they suddenly recessed to meet in their respective caucuses, and upon returning to the floor, quickly adjourned. Their explanation was that they did not have the votes to pass any bill that day. There will be a flurry of activity between then and Monday to try to convince a few Democrats to vote with the Republicans to pass a tax plan to send to the House for consideration.

In the meantime, the House Tax Committee did pass a bill out of committee for the House to consider. The bill eliminates the LLC pass through income exclusion and changes the tax rate on the existing brackets. Please remember that passing out a bill by a committee is only step one of the approval process. When debated on the floor of either chamber, there will be several amendments offered and the end product will most likely not resemble the original. As with the Senate, I would expect the House to be in session for most of the day to debate only that bill. As expected, the rescission bill and the tax bill will be the emphasis for the rest of the session. Having said that, the bills being passed out of committees this session will be heavily scrutinized by leadership. They will be evaluated for importance and priority before being considered for full debate by the Committee of the Whole. The goal and priority of the House and the Senate this session is to deal with the budget for the remainder of this year (rescission) and the next two years, and to pass a workable K-12 funding mechanism. These will, and should be the primary focus for all of us.

The Federal and State Affairs Committee continued the hearing on HB 2173 – a bill amending the Kansas Expanded Lottery Act relating to racetrack gaming facilities. The bill basically gives the racetracks the same income potential on slot machines as the casinos currently have. The bill does not expand gaming as some have claimed. The original law passed by Kansans allowed for horse and greyhound racing facilities in the state and further allowed for a maximum of 2800 slot machines. But, a subsequent bill placed the states portion of the slot machine proceeds to be 22% and required any slot machine proceeds from those on race tracks to be 44%. The bill lowers the requirement to 22% for both gambling venues. Had I been in the House when state run gambling was proposed my vote would have been no. The way the original legislation was made into law did not financially support schools, as many citizens believe. You may recall that fairness is always at the core of my decisions, and I do not believe the state should be picking winners and losers in business. The committee met on Thursday to work the bill. The numerous arguments on both sides were passionate, and the discussion, along with several amendment proposals, lasted for the entire meeting. In the end, on a very close vote, it was passed out of committee and referred to the House body for consideration.

The Transportation Committee held hearings on four bills:

HB 2076 – Creating the seat belt safety fund and increasing the fine for adult seat belt violations. This bill would raise fines to \$30 from \$10 with \$20 going to the SAFE program in schools.

HB 2170 – Allowing bicycles to be equipped with either a rear lamp or reflector. This is a technical cleanup bill. The law currently requires a lamp and the sponsors of the bill want to allow either a lamp or a reflector.

HB 2188 - Providing for increased penalties for right-of-way violations.

HB 2194 – Eliminating fees for certain motorcycle license applicants and allowing safety courses outside the state.

The committee also attempted to work three bills this week. My bill, HB 2040, on school bus safety was tabled when a former judge and an attorney on the committee had questions on the naming of legal jurisdictions within the bill. I encouraged both to have an amendment prepared so that when we take up the bill later it can be amended and moved out of committee. The bill, HB 2060, that would have increased the registration fee for hybrid and electric vehicles was tabled. In this case, the bill will likely never be seen again. The third bill, HB 2170, the bicycle reflector bill passed out easily.

Members of these groups gave presentations in the Ag Committee: Local Food & Farm Task Force, Kansas Association of Conservation Districts, Beginning Farm Loan Program, Specialty Crop Grants, Farmer’s Market Workshops, and County Local Food Council. Five bills were given hearings:

HB 2134 – Relating to certain department of agriculture fees

HB 2135 – Relating to fees for dairy businesses and the processing of paper documents by the Kansas Secretary of Agriculture

HB 2136 – Updating provisions relating to weights and measures

HB 2246 – Amendments to the Kansas noxious weed law

HB 2099 – Relating to remedies for the impairment of a valid water right or permit to divert and use water

All these bills trend around the centralizing of authority within the Department of Agriculture. I am more inclined to leave power with an elected body for the decisions. The last bill concerning water rights raised many questions involving senior vs. junior water rights, and the rights of metropolitan areas. Rights were granted to land owners as far back as the late 1800s. We left the hearing open to allow the interested parties time to discuss among themselves a possible solution. This may be yet another example of a bill written and brought before a committee that was not quite ready for consideration.

Meetings with constituents included; Terri Humphrey of SPCA concerning dog racing, Bill Sneed concerning HB 2150 allowing the KU Med Center the right to disallow conceal carry, Mary Reed Spencer of Alma concerning National MS Society, Reyna Perez of Topeka for YMCA Center for Safety & Empowerment, Connie Cahoon of Emporia on SOS Emporia, Dr. Joshua and Krista Hahn of Wamego concerning Marion Clinic where Krista is now the Executive Director. These visits, although short, give me perspectives on issues and aide in my decision making. The Kansas Banker’s Association was in town and I visited with Ed Martin of Wamego, and Randy Kufal of Westmoreland. I was unable to meet with the County Treasurers, as I always have in previous years, due to a conflict, and owe an apology to Linda Coon, Wabaunsee County; Shilo Heger, Riley County; Larry Mah, Shawnee County; Lisa Wright, Pottawatomie County; and Sharon Gaede, Lyon County.

I want to recognize Keera Lacock of Rossville. She was a winner in the 2016 Happy Birthday, Kansas! Student Photo Contest for the fifth grade. She and other winners were honored in the Capitol on January 27. Congratulations Keera! We are making final arrangements to recognize and honor more students from Rossville later this session as well. The Rossville football team are now State Champions three years in a row, and they deserve to be honored and congratulated at the Statehouse.

Linda and I are Delegates in the Kansas Republican Party and were pleased to attend the KSGOP State Convention February 10th and 11th held in the big First District in Manhattan. It was a chance to make new friends and catch up with old friends from across the state. The meetings included excellent training for county leaders, and preparations for the 2018 elections. The highlight was Allan West's keynote address. He is a former Congressman from Florida and retired decorated U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel who speaks glowingly of Kansas after being stationed here and completing a MS degree at KSU while teaching the ROTC program. He advised the state to never change our marketing logo, "Come Home to Kansas." He further stated, "The heart of America beats in Kansas."

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.

With kind regards,
Ron