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on Public Health and Social Services

Oklahoma House of Representatives

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Weekly Review

Legislature Wraps Up Work for the Year

Lawmakers wrapped up this year's session a week early, finishing a state budget and advancing several important measures.

The state budget this year totals \$7.2 billion, an increase of \$137 million due to the inclusion of federal funds provided for budget stabilization.

The budget protects the four core functions of government from cuts, including education, health care, prisons and transportation.

In addition, previous tax cuts were kept intact and lawmakers did not tap the state's \$600 million Rainy Day fund, which may be needed next year due to the national recession.

Most agencies, including the House, Senate and Governor's Office, received a 7 percent cut in this budget agreement. Common and higher education see about a 2 percent increase compared to last fiscal year, which should prevent the need for increased tuition. Transportation and Health Care also see increases over last year's budget, and Corrections, Veterans Affairs and Career Tech are all held harmless under the deal.

Rural legislators were able to prevent the elimination of the Rural Economic Action Plan, which supports infrastructure projects in rural Oklahoma.

The program will receive \$14.4 million this year, just 7 percent below last year's appropriation. Funding for the program will be generated through an increase in the fine for delinquent tag renewal, which will increase from 25 cents to \$1 a day. Of the 75 cents increase, 50 cents would go to REAP while the other 25 cents would stay with the tag agent.

Lawmakers prevented the furlough of state troopers on Oklahoma highways thanks to an additional \$2.5 million that will be directed to the Department of Public Safety. The agency was facing a \$6.3 million cut, but will now undergo a cut of just \$3.8 million.

Session Accomplishments

Facing a challenging economic climate this year, House lawmakers pursued an ambitious agenda to empower the private sector instead of growing government.

The following proposals are among the important measures gaining House approval this year.

Lawsuit Reform

Legislation to reduce the number of frivolous lawsuits in Oklahoma while allowing legitimate complaints to advance was finally approved after years of effort.

Although as many as 70 percent of medical lawsuits are frivolous and thrown out of court, millions are spent defending those bogus lawsuits, driving up the cost of medical care (especially in rural areas) and forcing doctors to leave Oklahoma.

Although Oklahoma ranks 6th in the nation in medical students per 100,000 people, the state ranks 49th in the number of physicians per capita because of frivolous lawsuits.

To make Oklahoma more attractive to doctors and business, House Bill 1603 limits vague, “non-economic” awards while still allowing full recovery of legitimate claims. The new law also limits court-shopping and requires a certificate of merit from an expert before a professional negligence case can advance.

Alternative Energy Reform

While continuing to promote Oklahoma’s oil-and-gas industry, House Republicans used free market incentives to secure the state’s national role in the alternative energy market.

That program includes legislation providing a significant tax credit to offset the cost of converting a vehicle to run on compressed natural gas or other alternative fuels plus a \$2,500 tax credit for installing home-fueling CNG stations.

In addition, House Bill 1949 allows the Department of Central Services to provide public access to alternative fueling infrastructure in underserved areas unless a private provider locates within five miles.

House Bill 1953 incentivizes wind energy use.

Help for the Uninsured

More Oklahomans would have access to affordable private insurance under a House proposal signed into law this year.

Among other reforms, House Bill 2026 strengthens and promotes the Insure Oklahoma program (which provides premium assistance to both small business workers and employers). The bill also creates a core benefits package for young, healthy Oklahomans to purchase cheaper insurance policies free of the cost increases created by the state’s 36 mandates. An estimated 70 percent of young adults aged 19-34 in Oklahoma do not have health insurance today because of the high cost.

Government Modernization

House Republicans advanced House Bill 1032 to free the Department of Central Services to negotiate the best possible terms and prices for state contracts. A 2007 IBM report showed Oklahoma could save up to \$70 million if purchasing best practices were in place.

Another measure, Senate Bill 980, creates a Chief Information Officer position in state government, putting one person in charge of computer security to prevent the theft of taxpayers’ private data. Under the legislation, state entities with licensing or permitting responsibilities will also be required to offer the public the option to apply or renew online to streamline the process.

Tax Cuts

Senate Bill 881 would make Oklahoma the 16th state that does not require military personnel to pay state income tax. More than 32,000 active duty military

servicemen are stationed in Oklahoma, but the state loses two out of every three soldiers recruited because of our tax burden. More are expected to make Oklahoma their “home of record” due to the tax break.

Water Protections Become Law

House Republicans advanced a plan that seeks to prevent out-of-state buyers from seizing Oklahoma’s water through judicial fiat. House Bill 1483 ensures Oklahoma’s current and future water needs take precedence over other considerations by asserting Oklahoma’s claim to its waters under federal interstate compacts and existing law that provides legislative oversight pertaining to water decisions.

Education Reform

Senate Bill 222 will provide parents a more accurate measurement of student performance by removing political pressures from student testing oversight. The legislation establishes a unified comprehensive, interactive database to track student testing and an independent task force to oversee the testing system.

Although 90 percent or more of Oklahoma student are rated proficient on state tests, the majority of students do not pass comparable federal tests. Because the State Superintendent of Public Instruction currently determines (and can alter) the passing score for state tests, officials feared political pressure could lead an official in that office to inflate passage rates. SB 222 will eliminate any apparent conflict of interest.

Lawmakers also advanced Senate Bill 834, the School District Empowerment Program, to lift unfunded mandates from state schools and increase local control.

The legislation would have allowed local school districts to choose which state mandates to implement, if any. Decisions would have been made at the local level to help better address community needs and give districts increased resource flexibility.

Unfortunately, the governor vetoed this important reform.

DHS Reforms

An extensive audit of the Department of Human Services led to passage of House Bill 1734. The bill seeks to reduce the number of children needlessly coming into the foster care system by improving DHS worker training in risk and safety assessment and allows information about a child’s physical and behavioral health and education to be available electronically to foster parents.

Physician Training and Access to Health Care

Funding to ensure Oklahoma State Medical Center in Tulsa stays open and continues training Oklahoma doctors was swiftly approved this year.

Under Senate Bill 1127, a mixture of state and private funds will be used over the next 5 years to keep the hospital open.

Pro-Life Legislation

Oklahoma children cannot be targeted for abortion because of their gender under House Bill 1595, which also requires greater reporting on abortion in Oklahoma. That data will help officials craft policies to help women avoid becoming so desperate they consider an abortion. In addition, lawmakers voted to ban cloning for the purpose of creating embryos for research purposes and help secure \$5.5 million in funding for adult stem cell research.

Voter ID Reform

Senate Bill 692 targeted voter fraud by requiring that individuals provide proof of identity before voting. Under the plan, which will be decided by Oklahoma citizens in the 2010 elections, a voter would have to provide a document with his or her photograph that was issued by a state, federal, county, municipal or tribal government, or provide a voter registration card.

Help for Families of Children with Autism

A House Republican plan to increase the number of therapists serving children with autism was also signed into law this year. Senate Bill 135 creates a licensing process for national Board Certified Behavioral Analysts and trains more doctors to treat autism while allowing the free market to adjust coverage based on the demand of services.

Term Limits for All Statewide Officials

Under Senate Concurrent Resolution 12, voters will decide if most statewide office holders would be limited to a maximum of eight years in office including the Lt. Gov., State Auditor and Inspector, Attorney General, State Treasurer, Commissioner of Labor, Superintendent of Public Instruction and Insurance Commissioner.

Ending Loopholes for Crooked Politicians

Senate Bill 899, which will prevent elected officials from collecting state benefits once convicted of a felony, was signed into law. Previously, politicians convicted of crimes could still receive taxpayer-funded retirement benefits, as seen in the case of former state Sen. Gene Stipe.

Deportation for Illegal Aliens in State Prisons

Illegal aliens in state prisons will face federal deportation under House Bill 2245, a new law saving the state millions of dollars. Under the legislation, the Department of Corrections would send non-violent illegal-alien inmates to United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement, saving \$3 million in the first year alone.

As this session comes to an end, I reminded of how proud I am to represent District 80, I strive to be pro-business by reducing the burdens of government regulation on the Free enterprise system. Should you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at 1-800-522-8502.



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