



LEGISLATIVE NEWSLETTER LEGISLATIVE NEWSLETTER

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Long Session Kicks Off Amid Pomp and Hints of What's to Come

They're In and Out: State lawmakers met for a ceremonial session on Jan. 11th to lay the groundwork for the long session, which cranks up Jan. 25, and is likely to continue into the summer. During the brief organizational session last week, House Speaker Tim Moore and Senate leader Phil Berger dropped hints about the legislature's 2017 agenda with Republicans keying in on continuing major goals since the GOP took control of the legislature in 2011: increasing teacher pay, decreasing taxes and cutting business regulations. House Bill 2, the so-called bathroom law, will surface again.

Some top GOP lawmakers told NCACTE they are hoping to work on some key positive legislation with Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper. That conciliatory tone spilled over last week as lawmakers convened the 2017-18 legislative session last Wednesday to organize themselves for the next two years amidst declarations of greater unity.

Background: The 2016 short session began with HB2 supporters and opponents squaring off in major counter-protests that resulted in some arrests of protesters. December hosted multiple special legislative sessions with gallery protesters during House and Senate sessions. Legislators convened last week's activities involving formal swearing-in ceremonies and leadership elections. Some agenda items include:

- **Teacher pay:** Berger said in his opening Senate speech that he favors increasing teacher pay again. "We'll continue efforts to reform and improve public education for our students and have already committed to raising average teacher pay to \$55,000 over the next two years," he said. Moore, the Speaker, was less specific in Berger on the issue, saying: "We've had great conversations on a number of things, and I applaud Sen. Berger in looking at that as a goal. We've come to believe that moving the needle forward on education compensation for our teachers is a good thing."
- **Tax cuts :** Moore said the General Assembly is apt to eye tax changes this year. In recent years, Republicans cut corporate and personal income taxes while increasing the state's sales tax on more services. "My position is I want to see us lower taxes as much as we can at every level," he said. "Are there any plans that are hard and fast right now? No, there aren't but there are a lot of discussions happening." Berger touched on the issue

in his speech. "We will not, under any circumstances, return to the failed tax-and-spend policies of the past that gave us the mess we inherited in 2011," he said.

Education Hires

NCDPI Update Education Hires: Mark Johnson, the new State Superintendent of Public Instruction, has chosen some of former Gov. Pat McCrory's employees to work at the state Department of Public Instruction.

Johnson hired Lindsey Wakely to be senior policy adviser and chief legal counsel. Wakely was McCrory's deputy general counsel and was former legal counsel for Variety Wholesalers, a company run by conservative businessman and former state budget director Art Pope.

Kevin Wilkinson is Johnson's special assistant. Wilkinson worked at the legislature for former Rep. Rob Bryan of Charlotte. Bryan, a Republican, focused on establishing the state's Achievement School District, which the legislature formed to have charter-school organizations run up to five low-performing schools from school districts. In addition, Meredith Steadman, Johnson's scheduler and special assistant, is a former McCrory scheduler.

Meantime, a law the legislature passed last month, which the state Board of Education is challenging with litigation, would have Johnson appoint the Achievement School District superintendent rather than the board. The law is now on hold. Johnson, who took office this month, defeated incumbent Democrat June Atkinson in November in the superintendent's race.

More on the Legislative and Executive Branches Outlook

Governor's Challenges: Gov. Roy Cooper's late last Tuesday expanded a lawsuit he had previously filed against Republican leaders of the General Assembly contending that laws passed in a special session just before he took office limiting his powers are unconstitutional. The move came as Berger, the Senate leader, acknowledged that the legislature's relationship with the state's governor will change now that Pat McCrory did not win re-election.

"We're in a little bit different environment," Berger said, adding that the GOP-controlled legislature had a Democratic governor in 2011 when Bev Perdue was in office. "We will see what needs to be done."

The News & Observer reports that Berger said the legislature has the "appropriate tools" in its membership and "our constitutional responsibilities to make sure things work for the people of North Carolina, and we intend to do that." House Speaker Moore told reporters he thinks lawmakers will have a good relationship with Cooper. But he defended the legislature's two special-session laws that limited the governor's power.

"There's always a healthy competition for influence among the branches," Moore said. "I've always felt like the legislative branch, being closest to the people, is the one that ought to be moving the agenda for North Carolina more than perhaps some of the others."

This and That

Longtime House Clerk Retires: Denise Weeks, a beloved House principal clerk since 1993 who's retiring, last Wednesday opened her last new legislative session. To fill her position, House legislators unanimously elected James White, who has worked with Weeks since 2012. Also, House Speaker Moore, R-Cleveland, said last week he hasn't yet chosen a permanent replacement for chief of staff Clayton Somers, who started a new job Monday at UNC-Chapel Hill as vice chancellor of public affairs and secretary of the university.

Quotes of the Week

"Everybody is nice and friendly when family is here, but don't worry the knives will come out quick."

- A non-lawmaker was heard making the comment during a largely ceremonial first day of the NC General Assembly on Jan. 11, before the full session begins in earnest on Jan.25 (The Insider, 1/12/17)

"The time is always ripe to do right."

- Martin Luther King

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