



LEGISLATIVE NEWSLETTER LEGISLATIVE NEWSLETTER

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Now that the Legislative Dust is Settling...

State Budget, Front and Center: With the so-called Super Majority in place to give the Republican-led legislature clout to override gubernatorial vetoes, attention already is turning to writing the two-year budget that begins July 1, 2017. The Insider reports that Rep. John Bell, the House Majority Leader, along with his House Republican Caucus allies, considers the budget "the biggest issue we will handle all session."

This year, the budget first will be worked on by the Senate. After it clears the Senate, it will go to the House where that chamber, Bell said jokingly, will "take their (Senate) budget and we'll fix it and make it better." First up though, the General Assembly must wait for Gov. Roy Cooper to recommend his budget plan, which then will face a major overhaul by lawmakers.

Legacy, Education Emphasis: Before stepping down, former Gov. Pat McCrory released budget priorities that included increased teacher pay, transportation initiatives, more mental health funding and increasing the Rainy-Day Fund. Bell told The Insider he hopes the upcoming biennial budget plan have broad bipartisan support throughout North Carolina, starting with education.

"Education is a huge issue because it represents 57 percent of our state budget," Bell said, adding that a regulatory reform bill that stalled last year will resurface. He said that bill "weighed on a lot of us and that's a priority that a lot of member of the General Assembly would want to see move forward."

Bell's House District 10 -- Craven, Greene, Lenoir and Wayne Counties -- was devastated by Hurricane Matthews. The third-term representative said a top personal goal this year to help get relief for his district and others hit by Hurricane Matthew and the western wildfires.

Rural, Urban Mix: While crisscrossing the state before the Nov. 8 election, Bell said he learned a lot of about the people his colleagues represent. "What works in Kinston may not work in downtown Charlotte. What works in Pasquotank County does not work in Raleigh," Bell said. "Everywhere is different, that's the great thing about our state. It's very unique, there's all different dynamics throughout our state."

The challenge for legislators, he said, is "making sure our urban areas are able to prosper and grow without leaving our rural areas so far behind." And when it comes to concerns about the General Assembly being too political, he notes that "the overwhelming majority of legislation" passed in the General Assembly is bipartisan -- something both sides bring up when asked about the perceived partisan climate on Jones Street.

"People tend to forget the state budget was overwhelmingly bipartisan," he said. "The General Assembly makes up really what the state looks like, so yeah the social issues are going to be more partisan than others. I've met with Gov. Cooper and we've found places where we can work together on -- and we'll do that because it's better for the state."

In recent days, legislative leaders and the governor have expressed optimism that they can work together for the good of the state and do good work. "If our common goal is to do what is best for the state then we'll find a lot more common ground than not," Bell said.

Education News

State Schools Superintendent: The Charlotte Observer reports that Mark Johnson, the new superintendent of public instruction and a former public school teacher, said traditional public education is vital. Still, he also strongly favors school choice as supported by U.S. education secretary-nominee Betsy DeVos. Johnson was part of the state's Republican sweep in November who has joined a lawsuit to support the General Assembly's move to broaden his powers. At the same time, Johnson said he wants to use that authority on behalf of superintendents, principals and teachers.

"I don't want to be the guy from Raleigh who goes and tells the superintendents what they have to do. I want to be the superintendents' guy in Raleigh working for them," Johnson said. "If you give superintendents the support they need, they in turn can give principals the support that they need, and principals can be good leaders of schools."

"Too much testing" was a focus of Johnson's campaign at a time when the federal government's switch from No Child Left Behind to the Every Student Succeeds Act gives the state more flexibility on that issue. Johnson said he sees a move toward using smaller tests given during the year, which can help teachers measure progress and adapt lessons. He cited the example of teachers who use digital technology to post a question and immediately tally student answers to see who has mastered that lesson, the newspaper reports.

Low-Performing Schools: The state's top education leaders still have not named someone to lead the turnaround of North Carolina's lowest-performing schools, more than six months after the position was created, WRAL News reports. Lawmakers told the media outlet that the State Board of Education and state superintendent need to "get going" and work together, despite their ongoing court battle over who has the authority over North Carolina's education bureaucracy.

"We've got kids that desperately need help. We've got to get going," said Rep. Craig Horn, R-Union, who helped put together the state's Achievement School District. More than 50 people from across the country have applied to be superintendent of the new school district, which will oversee some of the lowest-performing schools in North Carolina. But education leaders say a court case over a law that shifts power from the board to superintendent has put the issue in uncertainty.

Sen. Chad Barefoot, R-Wake, says the state board "had several months to make a hiring decision" before lawmakers passed House Bill 17 in December. The board filed suit to challenge the law. The court issued a temporary restraining order to prevent it from taking effect. "Because there is now a constitutional question on who has the authority to make these kinds of decisions, our hope is that the board will work with Superintendent Johnson to select a candidate that has his approval," Barefoot said in a statement.

Horn, chair of the House Education Committee, said state education leaders need to act. "We need to get moving," he said. "Like everything new, we're going to make some mistakes. Some people are going to crucify us for those mistakes. Some people are going to say, 'OK, you made a mistake. Let's straighten it out.'"

When lawmakers approved a bill last summer creating the Achievement School District, they asked Lt. Gov. Dan Forest, a Republican, to form a committee to help choose a superintendent. The committee interviewed applicants last fall and was to make a recommendation to the State Board of Education, which would decide who was chosen. However, the committee has still not recommended a candidate, despite assurances that they were close to deciding. A spokesman for Forest's office said recently that the committee had narrowed the field of applicants but that no official recommendation had been brought to the state board for a vote.

Quote of the Week

- "North Carolinians work hard and don't ask for much. They don't care if something is a Democratic idea or a Republican idea. They just want an opportunity for a good job in a place they are proud to call home. Let's get to work, find common ground, and build an economy that really works for everyone."

- Gov. Roy Cooper's comments as NC General Assembly began in earnest its long session Wednesday