



LEGISLATIVE NEWSLETTER LEGISLATIVE NEWSLETTER

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Legislative Action

Showtime for the Gov: Don't forget that at 7 tonight that Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper will give his hour-long televised State of the State address to the Republican-run N.C. General Assembly. In addition to the tradition of the governor being introduced in what will be a near standing-room-only state House as his "His Excellency," words that may not roll off some of his critics' tongues, look for more bipartisanship and less fireworks in the speech to the House and Senate chambers as well as elected state leaders.

In the past few months, since Cooper was elected as governor in November by a slim margin over Republican Gov. Pat McCrory, Cooper and legislative Republicans have sparred in court over gubernatorial powers and Medicaid. As former attorney general, Cooper in past years lambasted GOP legislation his office was obligated to defend and was criticized by lawmakers for not pursuing some appeals.

The Mood: Acrimony should give way to decorum when Cooper delivers his address to a joint session of the General Assembly. But don't expect enthusiasm from many Republicans who enjoy veto-proof majorities in the Senate and House and are skeptical of Cooper's agenda. "If he'll find ways to work with us I'm more than willing to do it," said Rep. Justin Burr, R-Stanly, "but I'm not going to sit here and stand by while he tries to cram his left-wing agenda down the throat of North Carolinians."

The speech offers a big chance for Cooper to press areas in his goals that may have bipartisan support, including his state budget proposing increases in education and economic development spending and criminal justice reform. "I hope he'll speak of the need for collaboration and working together -- Democrats and Republicans alike -- for the good of this state on things that we can agree on..." said state Sen. Floyd McKissick, D-Durham.

Also, the statewide television audience affords Cooper a pulpit to urge Republicans to work with him on other ideas such as repealing House Bill 2, the so-called bathroom law, and governance involving the State Board of Education.

Common Ground: The address comes at a time when Cooper, House Speaker Tim Moore and Senate leader Phil Berger -- who is scheduled to give the Republican response today after the governor's speech -- have discussed possible points of agreement. An estimated current-year budget surplus and \$1.5 billion of additional revenue anticipated in the next two years increases the possibility, particularly on teacher pay hikes. The trio met last week to discuss HB2; however, no deals appear to have been made, based on relative silence.

Former Gov. Jim Martin, a Republican, told the Associated Press that the State of the State is an important occasion for any governor -- especially for one with few friends in the Legislature -- to fine tune an agenda with a small number of achievable goals. "You try to pick 100 fights, then you lose focus and the public just hears a lot of noise going on," Martin said. "Pick four, five, six things and work at that over and over -- and eventually you get your message across."

What Else is Up

Closing Teacher Pay Loophole: A Senate committee last week began to close a loophole that could keep many teachers from receiving bonuses. The state's 2016 budget included a two-year pilot program that gives third-grade, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate teachers bonuses -- provided that they meet certain student achievement targets and continue teaching at the same school and grade at which they previously taught. In several cases, some teachers met those achievement targets but were reassigned to different grades or out of AP/IB classes, disqualifying them from the bonus.

"In the legislation that was [originally] passed, we found that teachers that were able to qualify for a bonus really, on no part of their own, were transferred or reassigned...then they wouldn't receive their bonus," said Sen. Trudy Wade, R-Guilford. Kim Leake, principal of Peck Elementary School in Greensboro, said she moved a teacher from a third- to a fourth-grade class and then later found out that move eliminated her bonus.

"This year, she's doing an outstanding job again, but she deserves that bonus. It was not that she asked to move. It was that I had to move her," Leake told lawmakers.

The idea of giving bonuses only to teachers who stay in their same grades and schools started a conversation about how teachers should be rewarded. Sen. Erica Smith-Ingram, D-Northampton, who is also a math turnaround instructor who teaches in different districts to get those schools accredited, questioned if a future bonus program would have the same requirements. The Senate Education Committee approved the measure, which now heads to Senate Appropriations.

School Staffing: Teacher shortages and competition among school districts to retain teachers is stepping up for some districts. The Daily Advance reports that in Currituck County, the untimely loss of a Spanish teacher required the district to set up a virtual, online teaching environment

until a Spanish-speaking teacher could be found. During a recent joint meeting between the Currituck County Board of Commissioners and the county school board, Schools Assistant Superintendent Sandy Kinzel was asked about the reported lack of a qualified teacher to teach the foreign language class. "In some areas, there are teacher shortages, quite frankly," Kinzel said. "Spanish teachers are very difficult to find." She said with that one Spanish teacher gone, the district had two options: Dissolve that class period and find other places for those students. Still, she said the other Spanish class and many other elective classes would have ended up overloaded.

How NC Stacks Up with Rest of Country: U.S. News & World Report, in its latest ranking of the states in terms of quality of life, put the Tar Heel state right in the middle. Of the 50 states, the magazine says, North Carolina is number 25 when it comes to 60 measurers such as education, health care, infrastructure, public safety, economy and the integrity of health of state government, giving something to crow about for both Democratic and Republican state legislators.

Rob Christensen, in a Marcy 12 News & Observer column, noted that North Carolina is a leader in the South, only bested by Virginia (11th) and Florida (24th). North Carolina was rated a far better state – using the objective yardsticks – than most of the rest of the South. South Carolina was 45th, Tennessee 39th and Georgia 36th. The top five states were Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Minnesota, North Dakota, and Washington State, according to the report that was prepared in part by McKinsey & Co., Leading States Index. The bottom five were Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, and New Mexico.

Education: On this issue, the magazine said, North Carolina ranked 21st in the country, with only Virginia higher in the South. North Carolina was tied for first with five other states in the quality of pre-kindergarten programs. It was rated above average in four-year college graduation rate, low debt at graduation, and college tuition and fees. North Carolina was rated average among the states in educational attainment, high school graduation rate and NAEP math scores. It was rated below average in college readiness, NAEP reading scores, pre-school enrollment and two-year college graduation rates.

Quote of the Week

"Folks, it makes common sense, which is rare lately, to ask questions of these candidates."

- Sen. Jerry Tillman, R-Randolph, on the Senate's confirmation process of Larry Hall as Secretary of the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (The Associated Press, 3/06/17)