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KLPG Capitol Highlights

FROM PINEGAR, SMITH & ASSOCIATES, INC.
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2024 LEGISLATURE WEEK FOUR

The State of Kansas is now 163 years old! Governor Laura Kelly was joined by lawmakers and state leaders in a Kansas Day celebration on Monday, January 29th, to share the history of Kansas and ensure the state's legacy is not forgotten. Governor Kelly spoke of how proud she is to be a Kansan and the importance of remembering and regaling what a terrific state we all live in. Kansas Capitol Site Administrator Tim Rues lauded the State House as a monumental structure with the most unique architecture and famous murals to be found in Kansas. The event concluded with cutting and serving a specially decorated Kansas Day cake displayed during the ceremony.

Governor Kelly vetoed the tax package that included a single-rate income tax, referring to it as a reckless experiment. Although the bill included several provisions in her tax plan, The Governor stays staunchly opposed to a single state income tax rate of 5.25% on all annual income over \$6,150, saying it primarily benefits the wealthy, does nothing to help the middle class, and could negatively impact public schools and infrastructure. The House appears to have the two-thirds majority it would need to override the veto, but the bill did not reach that majority when it passed in the Senate.

Kansas courts are going digital again! After a cyberattack shut down the e-filing system, the state Supreme Court mandated all district courts resume electronic filing by January 31st. Though the attack, believed to be from Russia, initially forced courts to rely on paper documents, Chief Justice Marla Luckert emphasized the importance of returning to standard procedures. With most courts, including Shawnee County, now finished updating their systems, new cases will be filed electronically, streamlining processes and improving document accessibility. While paper filings will still be accepted for existing cases and appeals, the shift back to digital marks a significant step in Kansas's court recovery.

Kansas has received over \$300K in federal funds to incentivize farmers to plant more specialty crops like fruits, vegetables, and nuts. This initiative aims to reduce the state's reliance on imported produce (currently at 95%), promote economic growth, and create healthier communities. Farmers can use the grants to research new crops, identify local challenges, and make agriculture more sustainable.

Kansas labor unions and businesses have reached a deal to raise caps on workers' compensation claims while reducing administrative costs for employers. This compromise avoids leaving the state with one of the lowest caps in the country. The maximum death benefit for workers increases to \$500K from \$300K. Permanent total disability benefits increase to \$400K from \$155K, and permanent partial disability benefits increase to \$225K from \$130K. Additionally, a cost-of-living adjustment will be implemented after 2027. Businesses gained concessions that limit their expenses, including reducing independent medical evaluations and simplifying medical record admission. The bill passed without opposition and is expected to move quickly through the legislature.

Law enforcement officials testified at a House committee hearing in support of a bill that would stiffen penalties for harming or killing police dogs. The bill was prompted by the death of K-9 Bane, who was strangled by a suspect last year. The current penalty is 30 days in jail and a \$500 fine. The new bill proposes 38-43 months in prison for causing a police dog's disability or death and 55-61 months if the dog is hurt or killed while the suspect is fleeing police. The bill also mandates a minimum 90-day jail sentence, a \$10,000 fine, restitution, and psychological evaluation for offenders.

Medicaid expansion bills continue to sit in House and Senate committees with little chance for hearings. House Health Committee Chair Brenda Landwehr said they have no plan to consider the bill before February 23rd, which is this year's 'Turnaround Day.' This is the first major legislative deadline of the session when passed bills move from Senate to House and House to Senate. Non-exempt bills stalled in committee without reaching the floor of origin will not move forward in the legislative process after this date. House Minority Leader Vic Miller noted the obvious - that putting off any hearing until after they return from their one-week turnaround adjournment makes it very unlikely to even get to the floor, let alone pass. Kansas is one of only ten states that have not expanded Medicaid.

Sedgwick County Commission has approved a location for a new state mental health hospital in south Wichita. The hospital will be built on an 11-acre plot of land near the intersection of Meridian and MacArthur. The land is being donated to the county by the Lange Community Foundation. The hospital will provide at least 50 beds for mental health treatment, and the site is large enough to expand the hospital to include 100 beds if needed. The county and state will begin designing the facility, which is expected to be completed by the end of 2026. The hospital care will be provided to patients with acute mental health disorders and criminal defendants who have been judicially mandated to receive mental health assessments before going to trial.

The Kansas Legislature is considering a bill that would ban ranked-choice voting in elections for public office. Supporters of the bill argue that it leads to stronger contenders and prevents spoiler candidates. At the same time, opponents claim RCV confuses voters and could lead to lower voter turnout. Kansas Secretary of State Scott Schwab supports the ban, citing the state's longstanding use of plurality methodology, but some lawmakers have expressed openness to the possibilities of ranked-choice voting.

The Statehouse is considering HB 2478 to identify accredited maternity centers as healthcare providers. This action would make the facilities eligible for liability insurance through the state-run Health Care Stabilization Fund. The focus is solely on birth centers and not on abortion clinics. Rural hospitals in Kansas that provide maternity health care are reducing services, while many Kansas communities no longer offer any maternity services for their residents. The change in the legislation would also allow such providers to accept KanCare, TRICARE, the VACCN program, and commercial insurance.

The Senate Federal and State Affairs Committee heard testimony on HB 2446, which would prevent cities and counties from banning plastic bags and straws. University of Kansas scientist Nancy Muma warned them about the dangers of plastic micropollutants accumulating in people's bodies. She urged the lawmakers to oppose the bill being backed by the Kansas Chamber despite knowing these plastics contribute to endocrine disruption and harm. A former business and regulatory law attorney also testified against the bill, emphasizing that it would infringe on local government authority and violate the Kansas Constitution's home rule provision for local governance.

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This is a weekly legislative summary of Kansas government, and other statewide news, gathered and compiled independently from various media reports.

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