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KLPG Capitol Highlights

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

Kansas House and Senate members returned to the capital on Wednesday following their brief “turnaround” break, which allowed legislative staff to catch up on the 100 pieces of legislation that were amended and approved before they left. The House Speaker and Senate President approved 52 non-exempt bills to carry over into the second half of the session by blessing them prior to the turnaround cutoff date. A majority of the bills blessed in both chambers center around healthcare, education, crime, and state budget issues.

Commissioner of Education Dr. Randy Watson spoke to the Kansas State Board of Education about the impact of Kansas K-12 schools enacting a 4-day week. Currently, 77 schools across 31 districts are using this schedule. Administrators in rural areas cite travel time for staff and students as a factor in the decision, where a simple dentist appointment could compromise an entire day. Schools still need to see significant budgetary savings, but several reports have said it has helped retain and recruit better teachers. None of the districts have claimed the change was initiated to improve student outcomes, and the Commissioner expressed some concern that records kept over the past two years indicate a slight decrease in test scores. With a third of Kansas students below grade level in math and reading skills, he wants that matter to be closely monitored.

Governor Laura Kelly revealed the Cutting Healthcare Costs Act, a revenue-neutral plan to expand Medicaid at no additional cost to state taxpayers. This builds on previous bipartisan legislative proposals to expand health coverage to working Kansans who currently make too much money to qualify for Medicaid but do not receive health insurance through work or make too little to afford private health insurance. In response to this action, the House Appropriations Committee has adopted recommendations from the Social Services Budget Committee this week to increase physician provider billing codes by \$33.9 million and to increase outpatient hospital billing codes by \$45.2 million. Lawmakers have stated they believe these investments will provide support for healthcare facilities, especially rural hospitals, and will enable access to healthcare for the genuinely needy Kansans.

Kansas lawmakers received a letter this week signed by over 100 childcare providers and stakeholders representing all 105 counties urging them to support Governor Kelly’s \$56 million budget allocations for early childhood care and education in fiscal year 2025. That funding would provide \$30 million for the construction of childcare facilities, \$5 million for a public-private childcare partnerships pilot program in rural areas, and \$15 million for workforce grants to provide an estimated 3,500 childcare organizations with \$4,000 endowments. The legislature has yet to re-review the budget line items since the Governor vetoed their first budget proposal.

Kansas Secretary of State Scott Schwab announced advance in-person voting for the March 19th Presidential Preference Primary, which will be open from February 28th through March 18th at noon. All voters who want to participate in this primary will need to declare a party affiliation when checking in at their polling location if they still need to do so. Visit <https://sos.ks.gov/elections/elections.html> for more information.

Kansas Forest Service Assistant Fire Management Officer Dennis Carlson reports that all fire departments across the state are preparing for an expected high probability of dry grassland and gusty wind contributing to outbursts of fires across Kansas in March. The Forest Service is asking all Kansans to be proactive in protecting their communities by clearing fire hazards such as yard debris and clogged drain gutters and by reporting any indication of fire or smoke as quickly as possible.

Representative Silas Miller proposed an amendment to HB 2596 this week that would have removed cannabis from the controlled substances list that the bill was focused on. The move would not have legalized the drug but would have decriminalized it in Kansas. Representative Pam Curtis spoke in favor of the proposal while also pointing out the billion-dollar economy boosts CO, MO, and OK have realized since legalizing the drug. However, House Speaker Hawkins suggested any discussion, debate, or consideration of issues related to marijuana could and should be revisited at a later date despite no bills being scheduled for deliberation this year. And with that, the amendment failed with a vote of 41-80. Kansas is one of only 11 states that has not legalized cannabis products and one of only four states in the nation that still criminalizes possession and use of it in all situations regardless of medical need.

Senator Mark Steffen introduced SB 417 to The Senate Agriculture and Natural Resource Committee in late January. The bill would repeal a rarely used law enacted in 1927 that gave the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks Secretary authority of eminent domain to take private property when necessary to protect, expand, or improve the conservation of state parks, state lakes, recreational areas, wildlife areas and sanctuaries, natural areas, fish hatcheries, and other lands, waters, and facilities. The committee approved the measure on February 20th and sent it to the Senate floor, where it passed three days later in an emergency final action roll call vote of 25 – 14. The House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources is now considering the legislation.

The Kansas Department of Commerce's Community Service Tax Credit Program is making \$4.1 available to assist public healthcare entities and private nonprofit organizations. This state program allows nonprofits to offer tax credits to donors for contributions towards major projects involving childcare, community service, healthcare services, Non-governmental crime prevention, and youth technical training and/or apprenticeships. Applications must be submitted between March 1st and April 30th. Charitable organizations may request up to \$200K in tax credits for projects that are unique or one-time in nature but will create lasting value. Applications for projects in communities with populations under 15K are eligible for a 70% credit, while all others are eligible for a 50% credit. Approved applicants are chosen through a competitive selection process. Community Development Specialist Sara Bloom will be available to answer questions about the program at 785-506-9278.

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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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