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KLPG Capitol Highlights

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2022 LEGISLATURE WEEK EIGHT

NO NEW WATER AGENCY FOR KANSAS

The Kansas House Water Committee reviewed a 283-page bipartisan proposal this week that would have significantly increased funding for state and local water conservation programs while merging them under a new state water department umbrella. Supporters pointed out that because more than \$80 million allocated for water projects have been diverted by the legislators to other uses over the last 15 years the state's water crises are now urgent. However, representatives from the Kansas Farm Bureau and Kansas Livestock Association adamantly opposed the reorganization claiming the disruptive change would do little to improve conservation efforts. After considering all testimony, the committee opted to approve a bill that would boost funding to \$49 million a year, with no mention of developing a new agency. The narrower measure goes next to the full House for debate.

EDUCATION BILLS THE FOCUS FOR THE FINAL MONTH

Kansas lawmakers start the final month of their legislative session this week facing a range of issues. They include how teachers talk about race and gender and whether to fund private schools with state tax dollars. Bills to give parents more control over what their children are taught on issues of race, gender and sexuality have passed out of committees, but the House and the Senate have yet to consider them. The same is true for bills that would allow low-income students to use state dollars to transfer to private schools. Senator Cindy Holscher opposes both these plans saying they are attacks on public education.

HAND STAMP ALTERNATIVES FOR ELECTIONS

Senator Richard Hilderbrand introduced SB 389 to the Senate Federal and State Affairs Committee this week. The bill would require counties to add a new, distinct watermark to all ballots each election cycle and would require a hand signature on ballots from all voters. The Senator believes, if passed, that this would prevent chances for human error and voter fraud and would eliminate the need for election clerks to hand stamp each ballot at the polls. However, spokespersons for the Secretary of State's Office and the Kansas Association of Counties expressed concerns about the additional costs' counties may incur with these measures.

CHANGES TO SUPREME COURT SEATING

Senate President Ty Masterson offered the Senate's Federal and State Affairs Committee a choice between two constitutional amendments that he proposed this week. The first calls for state supreme court justices to be elected rather than appointed. The second call for Kansas to adopt the federal format for seating the justices, where the Governor appoints, and the Senate confirms. If either amendment passes this issue would go to voters on the November ballot.

IMITATION MEAT PACKAGING PROPOSED

The Kansas House Committee on Agriculture is considering HB 2530 that, if passed, would restrict the use of the word "meat" on packaging for all meatless food products unless it is preceded by the word "imitation". The Kansas Livestock Association claimed that the companies that produce these items are purposely trying to confuse and mislead shoppers. The Kansas Chamber said that idea demeans Kansas' savvy consumers. He also expressed concerns about the environmental impact of forcing companies to produce separate state specific labels.

LIMITING ELECTION DROP BOXES

The Senate Federal and State Affairs Committee agreed on Thursday, March 3rd to limit each county to one ballot drop box unless the county has more than 30K registered voters, the bill would then allow an additional box for every 30K registered voters in that county. The legislation would only allow dropping ballots in the box during county election offices hours, meaning they would need to be monitored in person by an election official or by 24-hour video surveillance. Officials must collect and deliver the box contents to the appropriate election office by 7pm on election day. The proposed law also would start advance voting earlier now giving voters 23 days instead of just 20, but it eliminates the 3-day grace period that allowed ballots to be accepted through close of business on the Friday following an election. The bill also sets a new voter registration deadline of 24 days from election day rather than the current 21 days.

VOTER OUTREACH PROTECTED

Federal District Judge Kathrn Vratil has permanently blocked and barred the state of Kansas from enforcing a law legislators passed prohibiting out-of-state organizations from mailing requested advance ballot applications to voters because it violates both the First and the Fourteenth Amendments of the U.S. Constitution. The court also ordered the state to pay the attorney fees of the national nonprofit organizations - VoteAmerica and Voter Participation Center - who brought the suit saying it disenfranchised voters. The state has agreed not to appeal the order.

NEW MEMORIAL PROPOSED

Senator Elaine Bowers and 38 co-sponsors backed SB 479 this week seeking approval from the Capitol Preservation Committee for a permanent Kansas suffragist movement memorial to be in the state Capitol. The Senate Federal and State Affairs Committee on Tuesday approved the bill unanimously to be placed on the consent calendar as a non-controversial measure requiring less debate. An identical bill is in the House but has yet to receive a hearing. The idea came from the League of Women Voters of Kansas after their centennial celebration of the 19th Amendment which featured a traveling exhibit on the history of women's suffrage in the state. The memorial that could be a mural, a statute, a relief or some other art form would rely solely on donations without access to state funding.

KEEPING VETS IN KANSAS

The Kansas House passed HB 2605 with a 115-6 vote this week to adopt proposed changes to the Veterinary Training Program for Rural Kansas. The bill now pending in the Senate includes annual grant increases to as much as \$25,000 per student and expansion of program eligibility beyond first year in-state veterinary students at Kansas State preparing to work in this state after graduation. Representative Ron Highland, the only veterinarian in the Kansas House, said the bill would "fine tune" the selection process for the 15-year-old program that has been remarkably successful. 94% of recipients are still practicing in an eligible community today.

REVENUE EXCEEDS ESTIMATES

The Kansas Department of Revenue reported this week that total tax collections for the month of February 2022 were more than \$502 million - close to \$19 million more than estimated and 10% higher than taxes collected during the same period last year.

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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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