

**State of Oklahoma
House of Representatives**

March 21st – 25th, 2011
Weekly Wrap 7

Unlike last week, this week in session was relatively calm. The sixth week of session we were in the House Floor chamber each day and well into the night deliberating bills that sought passage before the March 17th deadline. At the end of last week, 263 of the 1,209 House bills filed in February will move on to receive further deliberation by the Senate.

To view the complete list of House bills that have passed to the Senate, please see the link on my website homepage at: www.jeanniemcdaniel.com

In stark contrast, this week we heard only two bills and a handful of resolutions on the House Floor, as we spent most of our time in committee meetings reviewing Senate bills. Of the 1,016 Senate bills filed, just 367 remain alive and must be heard in a House committee by April 14th.

Again, if you want to track these bills please use our House website at: www.okhouse.gov
Or, call my office at 1(800) 522-8502 if you have comments or questions:
www.okhouse.gov/Legislation/Default.aspx
Or to watch: <http://www.okhouse.gov/Video/Default.aspx>

In addition, there remain approximately 200 other appropriations measures that await action in a joint budget committee.

Oklahoma Veterans Celebrated!

On Thursday the House and Senate convened a joint legislative session to honor Oklahoma's veterans. Approximately 50 veterans were present in the House gallery as we thanked and honored the former military men and women for their service. At this time, 20 of the 101 House members and 13 of the 48 Senate members in the Oklahoma Legislature are veterans.

The House unanimously adopted a resolution honoring the late **Frank Buckles**, believed to be the last surviving U.S. veteran of World War I (110 years old) before he died last month. Chairman Peterson, of the Oklahoma Veterans Council shared that Oklahomans are resilient and generous. Oklahoma offers the best benefit package in the nation for our 325,000 veterans!

The budget is the top priority!

This year Legislators have a challenge to offset a \$500M shortfall from the budget passed last session. We must work diligently to help our agencies who are taking cuts, on top of those cuts from past years, continue to serve our children, families and most needy who depend on us for their basic needs. Over the past 2 years, many state agency budgets were supplemented to do their work and serve citizens with stimulus dollars and the state Rainy Day funds. These dollars are no longer available.

Work is underway on finishing up work on **Redistricting**. These plans must be voted on by the Legislature before session ends in May.

The **Joint Committee on Immigration** hosts the first meeting 3/29/2011.

On **March 22nd** the **Oklahoma Policy Institute** noted the current impact the combination of tax cuts and the recession has had on public services.

With personnel costs making up 93 percent of its budget, more cuts to the Public Safety Department will mean furloughs and possibly laying off troopers. The Department already has 110 fewer employees than 2 years ago, and more than half of the drivers' license testing sites across the state have been closed. A portion of these funds are being replaced by increasing the fee to reinstate a driver's license.

Oklahoma prisons are at 99 percent capacity with 8,000 more inmates and fewer staff than in 1995, which creates a dangerous situation where one officer can be supervising as many as 276 offenders. County jails have gone over capacity, with 1,348 state prisoners backed up in county jails at the end of 2010. Community sentencing, sex offender and substance abuse programs, and education and job training programs have all been cut or eliminated. Family visitation was cut to two weekends per month.

Reductions in mental health services are putting more of the burden of handling the mentally ill on state and local police. From 2009 to 2010, calls for police to help the mentally ill increased by 50 percent. Police spending hours to transport mental health patients across the state to find treatment. In the past 18 months, the Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services has eliminated 164 mental health and substance abuse beds. Even before the cuts, Oklahoma was ranked 46th in the nation for mental health services.

Oklahoma's county health departments have begun charging \$25 for flu shots because they can no longer afford to offer the vaccinations for free.

The Health Department has been pared back to the point where it is unable to sustain further across the board cuts without imperiling public health and epidemic disease response. Health Commissioner Terry Cline stated if the agency is cut more he would have to eliminate the Office of Child Abuse Prevention, which oversees 21 different provider contracts and is a primary source of services aimed at preventing abuse and neglect in families at risk for such outcomes.

The Tourism and Recreation Department is closing 7 state parks, including Adair State Park in Stilwell, Beaver Dunes in Beaver, Boggy Depot in Atoka, Brushy Lake in Sallisaw, Heavener Runestone in Heavener, Lake Eucha in Jay, and Wah-Sha-She in Copan.

Class sizes are going up across the state. At Tulsa Public Schools, elementary and secondary school class sizes rose by more than 8 percent, and other districts in the area saw class size increase of more than 5 percent. Tulsa Public Schools cut 225 teaching positions, while Union, Broken Arrow and Jenks cut 53, 32 and 22 positions, respectively. In Norman, the school board voted to freeze pay and benefits for all district employees.

Appropriations for Oklahoma community colleges have decreased almost 9 percent while enrollment is up 34 percent over the last decade. At the same time, cuts in federal aid through Pell Grants threaten to take away hundreds of Oklahoma students' access to a college education.

Items of Interest

This week a national survey of car insurance premiums announced that Oklahoma has the third highest premiums in the nation. Oklahoma's average annual premium for coverage is \$2,197.00. Only four states and Washington D.C. have annual premium rates over \$2000.00. While the reasoning for these high rates point to our large population of uninsured drivers, there is a valid argument to make as to which came first, the unaffordable insurance coverage, or the uninsured driver. I'm hoping the recent passage of laws regarding insurance verification will help us identify the uninsured and bring some relief to legal drivers.

With the passage of HB2131 Oklahoma recently took a big step forward in reforming the process in which we deal with nonviolent offenders. This bill seeks to shorten the time "low-risk, nonviolent" offenders spend behind bars in favor of expanded use of electronic monitoring, treatment programs and other forms of supervised release. Included in this proposal are reforms to: change sentencing structure from consecutive to concurrent terms; enhance eligibility for community sentencing; GPS monitoring programs for low-risk offenders; and streamlining the pardon and parole process for non-violent offenders. In Texas where a similar law was enacted there were savings of more than \$2 billion on inmate housing and prison construction and a reduction in crime of 10%.

An announcement was made recently by the Boeing Company that it is planning to build a second facility in Oklahoma City to accommodate 550 new jobs and expanded operations. In addition, Enid-based energy company Continental Resources has announced it would relocate to Oklahoma City, headquartering its operations in the current home of Devon Energy. The company expects to triple its work force in the next five years. The company employs approximately 250 in Enid.

Senate bills are in play...

The 367 Senate bills the House will be considering in the next few weeks will have similar themes to the past 6 weeks. Often identical bills are introduced in each chamber and only amendments create differences from language heard in House bills. So – we will be hearing bills that impact our pensions, schools, courthouse procedures (workers compensation, judicial selection, and lawsuit reform), firearms, prison reform, laws regarding women's reproductive issues, collective bargaining, and lastly – education from birth through graduate school.

Remember we have 9 weeks of session left and lots of work ahead. I will try to keep you updated on legislation that reflect concerns you have brought to my attention.