

Week in Review?

Friday, March 4, 2011

BUDGET

The Buckeye Institute released a 32-page document, "Six Principles for Fixing Ohio," which it said assesses two decades of irresponsible budgeting. Its six principles include the following: "The Past is No Guide for Today's Budgets"; "Break Labor's Stranglehold"; "Put Taxpayers and Vulnerable Populations Ahead of Government Pay Scales and Public-Sector Unions"; "Government Retirements Should Mirror What the Rest of Us Have"; "Make Thinking Outside the Box More Than a Slogan"; and "Demand the Federal Government Respect Our Ability to Get Things Done." These are the people who are influencing policy now along with the Chamber of Commerce.

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

The Senate passed SB5 (Jones), the collective bargaining overhaul measure, on a close 17-16 vote Wednesday, with opposition from all Democrats and six Republican senators -- Tim Grendell, Jim Hughes, Gayle Manning, Scott Oelslager, Tom Patton and Bill Seitz. The Senate Insurance, Commerce and Labor Committee had reported the bill out earlier in the day after adopting a 99-page amendment. But Senate President Tom Niehaus (R-New Richmond) had to fiddle with committee assignments to get the bill to the floor, pulling Seitz from Insurance, Commerce and Labor Committee and Oelslager from the Rules and Reference Committee. Boos, cheers and applause could be heard in the Senate chamber from crowds elsewhere in the Statehouse during hours of the debate on the bill.

Senate Republicans unveiled the omnibus amendment to SB5 (Jones) on Tuesday, even as an estimated 8,500 opponents filled the Statehouse and grounds. However, the vote on the amendment and bill was delayed until Wednesday, to give Senate Democrats the opportunity to review the changes.

Among the changes in the amendment were the following: restore limited collective bargaining rights as well as certain management rights; abolish the right to strike for all public employees; and replace existing law on work stoppages and binding arbitration with a progressive "dispute settlement" process that would resolve terms of employment through a mediator, a fact-finder, and finally a hearing panel representing management, if needed. The hearing panel, comprised of members of the employer's "legislative body," would select either the employees' last best offer or management's last best offer, which would be in effect for three years. It was this latter provision, however, which led Seitz and Grendell to oppose the bill because they said it circumvents any negotiation that might have occurred.

The Department of Administrative Services (DAS) released a fiscal analysis of SB5 that, using FY10 figures, estimated state and local governments would have saved \$1.3 billion if three provisions of the proposal were in effect. Those three provisions were limiting the state and local government health insurance contributions to 80 percent; eliminating step pay increases after current contracts expire; and eliminating longevity pay after current contracts expire.

As the Ohio General Assembly debated the changes in Ohio's collective bargaining laws, the Catholic bishops of Ohio encouraged leaders in government, labor, and business to pursue changes that "promote the common good without the elimination of collective bargaining. We urge continued good faith in ongoing negotiations. Civility, open communication, mutual cooperation, and peaceful witness should characterize legislative actions and public discourse," they said in a statement released Monday.

House Republicans promised extensive hearings on SB5, but that wasn't good enough for Rep. Matt Lundy (D-Elyria), who is introducing legislation to require regional hearings to gather feedback.

EDUCATION?

Some 4,000 STEM students in grades 5-12 will display scientific research and technological design projects over four weekends in March at district science days hosted by 15 colleges and universities on behalf of the Ohio Academy of Science (OAS). Student researchers will also compete for \$2.3 million in awards and scholarships in recognition of State Science Day later in the spring. Professionals from industry, government and academia will judge students on originality and creativity, use of scientific or technological design methods, clarity of expression, knowledge achieved, and teamwork.

The Ohio Department of Education announced an Innovation Symposium on Thursday, March 10 to discuss the \$17 million in Race to the Top money the state will use to support local classroom innovation.

ELECTIONS

Ohioans would be allowed to register to vote and change their addresses online, county boards of elections would be prohibited from mailing unsolicited absentee voter requests, and the controversial "Golden Week" period would be eliminated under elections reform legislation proposed Monday by Secretary of State Jon Husted. He said he would like to see something passed by May so that county boards can implement reforms by the November election.

GENERAL ASSEMBLY/STATEHOUSE?

Rep. Teresa Fedor (D-Toledo) announced Monday that a lawsuit had been filed in the Franklin County Court of Common Pleas over the "locking out of citizens" from the Ohio Statehouse on Feb. 22 and in anticipation of public access issues during planned protests against SB5 (Jones) the week of Feb. 28.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Gov. John Kasich -- as long rumored -- named former Ohio auditor and attorney general Jim Petro chancellor of the Ohio Board of Regents this week. The appointment is effective March 14 and is subject to the advice and consent of the Senate.

NONPROFITS

Innovation Ohio, a new nonprofit led by Janetta King, a former policy aide to Gov. Ted Strickland, launched Tuesday with a promise to provide "rapid-response" analysis to the issues of the day from a progressive point of view -- a mission it began with sharp criticism of collective bargaining overhaul SB5 (Jones). Strickland had talked post-election about forming a counterweight organization to the policy organizations championing conservative causes, but he will not have any formal role with the group, King said. Dale Butland, a long-time media strategist for Democrats, will be the group's communications director.

PENSION FUNDS?

The chiefs of the five state pension funds went to the Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee to dispute the prevailing narrative that public pensions are unsustainable, criticizing a study that pegged unfunded liabilities nationwide at \$3 billion and arguing that defined-benefit plans are less risky for workers than defined-contribution plans.

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