

First Quarter 2016 Montana Government Affairs Report

The days are longer, the sun is shining and the first quarter of 2016 is behind us. Political races are gearing up, over 50 bill drafts have been submitted for consideration by the 2017 Montana Legislature, and legislative interim committees are starting to discuss legislative proposals on key topics such as mental health reform, regulating air ambulance services, and investing in Next Gen 9-1-1. A School Funding commission is also evaluating the current education funding model and determining if adjustments or changes are warranted.

Legislative Council has started preparation activities for the 2017 Legislative Session to begin on Monday, January 2, 2017. The council is seeking information from legislators on proposed rule changes and will consider proposals on TVMT, best practices for legislative emails and guidelines for legislator appointments to committees and commissions in May. (Sen. Bob Keenan – Big Fork)

The Children, Families, Health and Human Services interim committee at its March meeting agreed to consider legislation on topics related to its study of guardianship and Alzheimer's disease, along with several mental health proposals tracking children's mental health. In 2015, the Legislature invested nearly \$19 million in new money to mental health, specifically expanding community-based services. CFHHS is also tracking child protective services and will be considering options for changing Montana's process for handling cases in May. Updates on the Montana Development Center facility and transition and Medicaid expansion were also presented in March. CFHHS next meeting is May 9 in Helena. (Rep. Al Olszewski – Kalispell)

Economic Affairs interim committee is studying air ambulance issues related to cost transparency and disclosure and reimbursement issues. A working group lead by the Commissioner of Insurance is underway and includes representatives from Kalispell Regional Healthcare and other stakeholders. The working group will present recommendations to EAIC on April 14. EAIC is also focusing on licensing boards and their potential to limit competition, along with funding options for licensing boards. Finally in April, EAIC will discuss broadband issues across Montana and how wireless networks supplement broadband connectivity.

The **Energy and Telecommunications** interim committee has been working on several proposals to update Montana's 9-1-1 laws and recommend resources to update Montana to "Next Gen 9-1-1". The recommendations came from a stakeholder group that considered technology enhancements, governance and costs. To prepare for the transition, Montana will work with individual counties to assess the current use of GIS data and operations in Montana counties. The costs of the *Next Gen* transition is approximately \$5 million that will come from existing accounts designated for this update. ETIC is also continuing to work on net metering and trying to find workable solutions to the costs and benefits of net metering in Montana. ETIC has agreed that rural electric cooperatives, such as Flathead Electric, should not be subject to net metering laws and should oversee their own net metering programs. **ETIC will meet in Kalispell on May 12-13.** (Rep. Keith Regier – Kalispell)

Education and Local Government and a **School Funding Interim Commission** are exploring enhancements to education funding, the needs of school facilities across the State and career and technical education in secondary schools. Flathead Valley Community College, along with Montana's two other community colleges, will present information on enrollment, programs and plans for the future. The committee will also review dual credit enrollment (a program for high school students to receive college credit within the MT University System) and discuss charter schools. Bozeman, Troy, and Libby have submitted applications to seek charter school designation.

In April, ELG is also conducting a study on local fire and emergency services, county road easements on state trust lands and youth concussion laws. Many counties across the state have encountered problems with statutes that govern disposal of county property and the committee will explore ways to clarify the law to benefit counties.

In March, the **Environmental Quality Council (EQC)** continued work on its study of federal roads, inaccessible public lands, and big game management (HJR13). A final study and recommendations on HJR 13 will be presented in May and public comment will continue through July on the study recommendations. EQC also heard updates on the proposed delisting of the Yellowstone-area grizzly bear from the federal list of endangered and threatened species; the state's Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program; and habitat management at FWP and forest management in DNRC's Trust Land Management Division. EQC meets on May 4-5 in Helena. (Rep. Ed Lieser-Whitefish)

The **Legislative Finance Committee** met in March to receive updates on budget status, state employee benefit plans, state infrastructure for building and leasing and Medicaid expansion. The estimated general fund ending balance for FY 2017 is \$357 million and current revenue trends indicate general fund collections could be down about \$90 million, however wage growth is still strong. Medicaid expansion reported 36,320 newly eligible Medicaid recipients under the HELP Act. Benefits for new enrollees started January 1, 2016 and as of March 2016, \$21.3 million in federal fund expenditures has been recorded against the statutory appropriation in SB 405. LFC will meet in June to look at fiscal year end revenues and expenditures. (Sen. Bob Keenan-Big Fork)

Law and Justice interim committee has focused on sexual assault in Montana and heard various proposals to enhance education and prevention efforts. The committee also heard updates from the crime lab expansion to Billings, the restorative justice program and the public defender program. LJIC will consider legislative proposals at its next meeting in April. (Rep. Steve Lavin-Kalispell)

The Revenue and Transportation interim committee wrapped up work on five of its nine studies and will consider legislative recommendations on June 9-10. The committee received updates from the Department of Revenue on the income tax season, major court cases involving the MTDOR and on the reapplication of tax-exempt properties. The MT Department of Transportation provided information on the federal highway funding bill, 2015 crash data and reports on biodiesel refunds and compliance with special fuel laws. (Sen. Mark Blasdel-Kalispell and Rep. Greg Hertz – Polson)

At its February meeting, the **State Administration and Veterans Affairs** was focused on the study of personal information ownership and reviewed how property rights (as opposed to privacy rights) should guide policymaking concerning the collection, use and distribution of personal information. The committee did not make any decision about recommendations under its HJR 21 study on privacy. SAVA voted to consider a bill draft to clean up election laws, specifically on local government elections at its April 19 meeting. (Sen. Dee Brown –Hungry Horse)

State-Tribal Relations met on the Rocky Boy's and Fort Peck Reservations in March and will meet in Helena in July. The committee is reviewing and working on solutions to address concerns related to Indian child welfare services and youth suicide prevention strategies. (Rep. Zak Perry- Columbia Falls)

Water Policy interim committee met in March to continue its study of the section 404 permitting process. The Clean Water Act requires a section 404 permit for anyone depositing fill or dredge material into a jurisdictional waterway. The program is currently operated by the U.S. Army Corps

of Engineers and the state of Montana is considering taking over the program. WPIC meets in Bozeman on May 2-3.