

Greetings! When you read this, the Legislature will be back in session after its February break - it is hard to believe we've already reached that point! Leading up to the break, the House committees and Senate committees have been busy holding public hearings on the bills that have been introduced. The Commerce Committee has heard numerous bills concerning insurance (such as a bill establishing a commission to study affordable and accessible health care for New Hampshire citizens), banking, and the alcohol commission (a bill relative to the hours of sale of alcoholic beverages in stores, among others).

Last week, Governor Lynch presented his budget to a joint session of the House and Senate. Among the highlights were a proposed balancing of the budgets of various state administrative agencies (based, in part, by eliminating more than 300 vacant positions - some that have remained unfilled for years), a proposed increase in the tobacco tax by 28 cents (which still keeps New Hampshire's cost per pack lower than neighboring states), and a goal of enrolling an additional 10,000 children in New Hampshire's Healthy Kids Children's Health Insurance Program over the next three years.

Also addressed, of course, was education funding. The Governor proposed a 5% increase in education aid to all communities as an interim measure while the Legislature works to meet the Supreme Court's recent deadline to define an adequate education by June 30th. In addition to approximately \$1 billion in adequacy grants, the state will also spend about \$191 million over the biennium on other state aid to schools including building aid, local education improvement grants, and state testing. The Governor has also proposed increasing funding for New Hampshire's community technical colleges by \$10 million and increasing funding for the University System by \$16 million, as well as providing a \$4 million increase in dropout prevention.

He called once again for a constitutional amendment allowing for targeted aid (from donor towns to recipient towns). A constitutional amendment would be necessary because the New Hampshire Supreme Court has previously ruled that targeted aid violates the New Hampshire Constitution. I am not inclined to support constitutional amendments in general. Constitutional amendments require approval by a 3/5 vote of each house of the General Court to send a proposed constitutional amendment to the people at the next election, where a 2/3 vote of the voters is required to adopt a new amendment. There is a reason adopting a constitutional amendment is not easy: a solution that works today may not work five years from now (and would require another constitutional amendment). However, I am committed to keeping an open mind - not only am I eager to see what the substance of a constitutional amendment might say but also understand how important it is to address the education funding situation for the State.

Please contact me with your thoughts on this or any other topic.

Regards,

Matthew Houde