

GAVEL-TO-GAVEL COVERAGE OF THE 2004 MINNESOTA LEGISLATIVE SESSION

EDITOR'S CORNER

Legislators were very busy last week moving budget bills through the legislative process in both houses of the Minnesota Legislature. The House of Representatives passed a number of budget bills off the House floor and continues to do so during this shortened legislative week. On the Senate side, senators will likely pass one large omnibus bill to fund all aspects of state government tomorrow. That sets up what could be a drawn-out conference committee process, starting sometime after Easter. Legislators will enjoy a long weekend to celebrate the holiday, leaving the State Capitol on Thursday afternoon and not returning until late Monday afternoon for floor sessions in both bodies. After Easter, legislators will begin final preparation of the 2004 Bonding Bill and start the long march to the end of session in May.

NAMES AND NUMBERS

Senate

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Minority Leader Dick Day 651-296-9457

House

House Information 651-296-2146
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Issues to Watch:

Senate DFL Announces its Budget Plan:

Senate Majority Leader Dean Johnson (DFL-Willmar) held a press conference on Friday to announce the Senate DFL's plan to fix the current-year budget deficit. While repeatedly characterizing the shortfall as the "Pawlenty Deficit," Senator Johnson outlined his caucus' proposal: additional revenues realized from the closure of "corporate tax loopholes" and more money from the up-front collection of car rental sales taxes and improved collection of cigarette sales taxes, a 5% cut to state agency operating budgets, including the reduction of the number of upper management positions in the Governor's Office and other state agencies, and short-term shifts from specific state funds to the general fund. DFLers also propose additional spending for public safety and human service initiatives. The plan does not call for use of any of the state's \$631 million budget reserve. Republicans denounced the budget fix as an attack on business and a proposal for higher taxes.

Senate Plays Hardball with Confirmations:

The Senate confirmation process was a centerpiece of last week's legislative action. The confirmation of Minnesota Lieutenant Governor and Transportation Commissioner Carol Molnau was rejected by the Senate Transportation Committee after a contentious hearing. Molnau's rejection by committee still needs to be ratified by the full Senate. Also last week, Education Commissioner Cheri Pierson-Yecke faced the first of two hearings to determine her confirmation. Advocates for both her confirmation and rejection came to the Senate hearing to express their views of Commissioner Pierson-Yecke and her stewardship of the Department. Many Democrats in the Senate see Commissioner Pierson-Yecke as a partisan ideologue. The second day of her hearing process is next week. The outcome of these confirmation hearings will set the tone for the balance of the session.

What Happens Next:

Capitol wags are already handicapping what will happen in the rest of the 2004 legislative session. Some see the Senate DFL's rhetoric around the budget as a sign that the caucus plans to stay and fight for their priorities. Minnesota Senators do not face re-election this fall, so some may not be in a hurry to leave the Capitol this year. House Republicans plan to keep things moving on their side after Easter by turning attention to the bonding process to get a bill completed. The big issues to watch for in April and May are whether the legislature passes a budget bill to address the current fiscal year deficit and whether legislators can agree on the size of a Bonding Bill. Legislators are not obligated by law to adopt either measure. They can force Governor Tim Pawlenty to reduce the deficit by executive order, a prospect Democrats enjoy contemplating, and prepare a Bonding Bill next year (or the year after). While it is likely the legislature will pass both bills and go home, nothing is ever certain at the State Capitol.

Quote of the day:

"This is a budget that only the Sheriff of Nottingham could love."
St. Paul DFL State Representative Cy Thao complaining on the House floor about the House Health and Human Services Budget Bill