

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

EDITOR'S CORNER

Legislators returned to the State Capitol after the five-day Easter recess last week. They have not had too much to do since their return. Both the Minnesota House of Representatives and Minnesota Senate passed omnibus budget bills nearly two weeks ago. The House passed several different bills for the various funding areas, while the Senate adopted one massive omnibus bill. Legislative leaders will likely continue to engage in a game of stare-down this week, and possibly next, before naming conference committee members to iron out the differences in their budget proposals. The work of the Minnesota Legislature this week will be centered around the House and Senate Tax committees as those panels assemble their omnibus tax bills. House Tax chair Ron Abrams (R-Minnetonka) will unveil his proposed tax bill in the committee today where it is likely to receive much partisan debate. In addition to work on the tax bills, the House and Senate Capital Investment committees will begin to assemble bonding bills to fund public infrastructure projects. Negotiations over the tax and bonding bills, along with the budget bills, form the heart of the work legislators need to complete in the next four weeks before adjournment. Hold on, it's bound to be a bumpy ride to May 17.

NAMES AND NUMBERS

Senate

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Majority Leader Dean Johnson 651-296-3826
Minority Leader Dick Day 651-296-9457

House

House Information 651-296-2146
Speaker Steve Sviggum 651-296-2273
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Issues to Watch:

Is the Senate DFL Changing Its Position on Gaming?:

Capitol observers were surprised to hear the comments of Senate Majority Leader Dean Johnson (DFL-Willmar) ten days ago at an impromptu press conference for reporters from several rural news outlets. Senator Johnson said "it would be foolhardy to tell you folks that gambling is dead. It is not. It just is not." Senator Johnson went on to say that Senate DFLers would not approve a racino at Canterbury Park, but may be open to other forms of gaming from a new horse track to a new casino to help "the poorer tribes." House Speaker Steve Sviggum said he would welcome a Senate DFL change in position. It is certain that any change in the present gaming environment will be opposed by most of Minnesota's tribal governments. Senator Johnson's comments seem likely to keep the expanded gambling debate at the forefront of legislative negotiations until the end of the 2004 legislative session.

Smoke 'Em If Ya Got 'Em:

The House Tax Committee reviewed a proposal authored by State Representative Fran Bradley (R-Rochester) to raise the state's cigarette tax by 29 cents to 77 cents per pack last week. Representative Bradley, the powerful chair of the House Health and Human Services Finance Committee, believes smoking causes higher health care costs. He thinks a higher tax on cigarettes would discourage some people from lighting up, while reimbursing the state for smoking-related health costs. Minnesota currently ranks 35th highest among the 50 states in cigarette taxes. If Representative Bradley's legislation became law, the state would rank number 22. However, Representative Bradley faced some stiff opposition in committee. The measure was tabled for possible inclusion in the House Tax Bill.

Senate Gives Leg Up to Chiro:

A provision in the Senate Omnibus Budget Bill, passed on Thursday April 8, 2004 at 4:00 am, includes a workers' compensation provision which was not approved by the state Workers' Compensation Advisory Council. The provision increases reimbursement rates for Minnesota chiropractors by about 60%. Generally, the legislatively-created Advisory Council, which is made up of business and labor representatives, recommends workers' compensation changes to the Minnesota Legislature, which acts upon the recommendations. The Senate's action will be strongly opposed by the House in conference committee.

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