

Legislative Update

From State Rep. Danny Ford General Assembly Completes 2000 Session

The sixtieth and final day of the 2000 General Assembly arrived on a warm sunny day in the Bluegrass. Though there were major issues yet to be decided, members worked together to complete a remarkable Session. The legislature was able to provide a \$14 billion basically revenue neutral budget for the next biennium including over seven hundred projects across the state. Offsets of a \$75 million cut in taxes paid into the unemployment insurance fund, combined with a six percent tax on out of state long distance phone calls, enabled the movement of funds to those areas seen to have the most need, like education, roads, health services, etc., actually lowering the overall tax burden on Kentuckians.

Taxes proposed earlier in the Session were denied by the General Assembly, including gasoline taxes, service taxes, property taxes, limited liability corporation taxes, and the broad communications tax, deemed inappropriate and unnecessary. By holding to a revenue neutral philosophy, reviewing funds on hand, and expecting more diligent oversight on expenditures, the General Assembly demonstrated the potential influence of a more balanced system of representation. This in turn saved the individual tax payer possibly as much as one hundred dollars a month in out of pocket tax expenses. These are dollars that individuals, rather than the government, can choose to spend on needs for themselves and their families.

The General Fund Budget that extends from July 2000 through the end of June 2002, directs increases from all agencies that provide services to Kentuckians, gives significantly more dollars to local schools and universities than past budgets, and includes the entire list of about over 700 suggested community development projects spread throughout the 120 Kentucky counties.

Though many issues combined to establish the results of the legislative agenda, some are of particular interest and importance. The Early Childhood Development program established in this Session under the Governor's direction is a compre-

hensive \$55.7 million plan that focuses on more than 257,000 children in the state under the age of six. To be funded with 25% of the Tobacco Settlement Phase I dollars, the program includes vision and hearing screening, a statewide immunization program, scholarships for child-care workers to upgrade training, a rating system for child-care facilities, and increased subsidies for low-income families.

Important initiatives for those with mental health and developmental disabilities were addressed in several bills. Provisions were established to provide more information to patients of state owned facilities about any planned changes. Another bill provides more funding for assisted living. HB 268 was a major initiative which applies to group health plans for fifty or more and requires insurance companies to offer the same level of coverage for mental illness and substance abuse as for physical illness and disease.

One of the last issues to be finalized in the Session was the Phase I Master Tobacco Settlement Agreement, HB 611. Kentucky is expected to receive more than three billion dollars over the next twenty-five years through this agreement. Twenty-five percent of the funds are allocated for the Early Childhood Development Program. A second twenty-five percent is set aside for a Health Insurance Initiative that covers patient protection and establishes a High Risk pool for the individual market. Fifty percent of the settlement is designated for agriculture. Thirty-five percent of the agriculture allocation

is directed back to the local counties based on a tobacco dependency formula. The other sixty-five percent will be controlled by a statewide board with projects to be determined on their merit through grants in research, marketing development and other projects deemed to strengthen the agriculture industry in the state. A provision to supplement a separate \$15 million fund that compensates farmers for lost tobacco quota from Phase II will be honored prior to the percentage calculations.

Changes to the Workers' Compensation program through HB 992.

were less extensive than originally expected, but brought some relief from the reforms enacted in the 1996 Special Session. The legislation raises benefits by nearly seventy-five percent for a large majority of employees with permanent partial disabilities, while compensation insurance costs to employees with permanent partial disabilities, while compensation insurance costs to employers is only expected to raise about ten percent. Employers are aided through provisions in the budget that cut the tax paid by employers into the unemployment insurance fund by \$75 million.

Another of the main issues of the Session was legislation to combat adult illiteracy. The Adult Education and Literacy program received approval on the last day through the passage of SB 1 and is seen as an important investment in our people. The legislation established the goal of significantly improving opportunities for adult education in Kentucky.

Of the several proposals for Constitutional amendments to be presented to the voters in November, only two were passed. One would abolish the elected position of Railroad Commissioner, a position whose few remaining duties have been transferred to the Transportation Cabinet through a reorganization. The other amendment that will be presented for voters' consideration proposes a thirty day General Assembly session following the Organizational Session in odd numbered years. Passage of this amendment would remove the necessity for the Governor to call so many special sessions and give lawmakers greater oversight of financial and regulatory activity on behalf of citizens.

In the coming weeks, I will share summaries of other legislative decisions from this Session in which you may be interested and talk about issues that were requested but not passed in final consideration this year. In the meantime, please contact me with any particular questions you might have or to share your comments. You may always reach me here in the District, or you may continue to use the Legislative Message Line, toll-free at 1-800-372-7181.

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