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Legislature Reconvenes After Winter Break

The State Legislature ended its recess this week and began its home stretch towards “cross-over” day, the deadline for the House and Senate to act on bills originated in their respective bodies before the other chamber may consider them. This process of which you will read more about in the coming weeks, should be complete by March 20.

The House found itself holding some final work sessions and taking final committee votes on some key pieces of legislation with several bills to wrap up next week, including radio frequency identification, a bill that has pitted business interests versus privacy advocates for the better part of two years. The House also had one full day voting bills up or down as it begins its version of March Madness in trying to debate and act on hundreds of pieces of legislation before the aforementioned cross-over deadline.

In the Senate this week, there were multiple actions taken relating to revenues (which according to February’s reports continue to lag) and school funding. The beginning of the week saw the Senate Ways & Means Committee vote down two video slot machine bills that would have expanded gambling at the four horse and dog tracks in NH and potentially at the grand hotels and in Berlin. As long as there is not an insurmountable revenue need in the state, those efforts will continue to be a gamble that the Legislature will not bet on.

However, there are efforts to create that insurmountable revenue need by virtue of increasing state spending with more aid to education. This debate continues to rage in Concord when last month, the State Senate passed a proposed constitutional amendment to be able give some school districts more than others. That proposal must now be debated in the House where the divisions over this proposal may be too wide to be able to cobble together the necessary three-fifths majority. In addition, a new school-funding plan is being debated in the Senate that increases education spending by \$65 million over last year. It passed the Senate Education Committee on a 4-2 vote and will go next to the floor of the Senate but those who supported the measure indicate that it still needs some tweaking. It appears that the education funding plan will have some cities and towns gaining increases and others receiving less state aid than in previous years. And by its very nature, it is likely to bring back donor towns whereby those communities will be paying more into the state than they receive for state aid. We have not heard the last of this debate.

NH Mourns the loss of Mike Whalley

Though the State Legislature was just reconvening this past week after taking a week off during the February school vacation period, it took time out to say goodbye to one of their longtime leaders. State Representative Mike Whalley, the House Republican Leader from Alton, passed away last weekend. Before entering the Legislature, Mike and his family lived in Bow and operated a small business in Hooksett that grew to include stores in Laconia and Tilton. Mike was a person who loved NH, loved the give and take of the legislative process, and loved working with people. But perhaps most of all, Mike loved family. He loved his family and when speaking with him you would know that as well as how he felt about families in general. Mike would always take a moment to ask about your family and how they were doing. Mike was a leader in Concord for two decades working to achieve and leave behind for future Granite State families a better New Hampshire. He certainly did that.....but he left us much too soon.

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CHAMBER INSIGHT:

Annual Legislative Dinner Set for March 31st

Closing in on the half way mark of the legislative session can only mean one thing: its time the Chamber's Annual Legislative Dinner! The 2008 GMCC Legislative Dinner will be held on Monday March 31st at the Bedford Village Inn.

The GMCC believes a strong relationship between our elected officials and the business community is critical to ensuring our state's laws and regulations are in step with the needs of the businesses and their employees. The legislative dinner aids in strengthening that relationship by providing a relaxed environment for chamber members and our State Representative and Senators to socialize and discuss the issues that are important to them.

Besides the social aspect of the dinner, the evening also includes a formal program that is both informative and entertaining. A presentation recapping the Chamber's legislative priorities leads off the program, followed by moderated panel discussion featuring the Chairman of the State Republican and State Democratic Parties. Republican Party Chair Fergus Cullen and Democratic Party Chair Ray Buckley will each have the opportunity to offer some opening remarks and then will be asked a series of questions centered on pending business issue in the legislature, the upcoming presidential election, and NH's changing political landscape.

The dinner promises to be an enjoyable evening and I hope you will consider attending. The cost to attend is \$75 for members and \$90 for non-members. To register please contact Laurie Gouley at customerservice@manchester-chamber.org or call 666-6600. The Chamber would like to extend their thanks to National Grid and Anthem for their generous support of this program.

Key Business Issues Set for Next Week

Next week see legislative action on several key business issues the GMCC has been following closely:

HB1404, which creates a liability cap for commuter rail operations, goes before the full House on March 12th with a unanimous recommendation of ought to pass from the House Transportation Committee. The GMCC strongly supports HB1404 as establishing a rail liability cap will lower operating costs and help move the Lowell to Manchester rail project forward.

HB1472, relative to workforce housing, also goes before the full House on March 12th with a recommendation of ought to pass from the House Municipal and County Government Committee. The GMCC strongly supports this bill as it clearly defines the term “workforce housing” and will help expedite the municipal review process facing developers.

SB391 & SB540, the Governor’s HealthFirst program, will finally have a public hearing in the Senate on Monday. While the GMCC strongly supports the goal of this bill to lower health care premiums for small employers, the current language of the bill is unacceptable. As currently constructed the bill fails to balance government oversight with free market principles and could potential cost shift health care costs from small employers onto other segments of the employer marketplace. The GMCC plans to actively engage legislators on this issue and work towards a solution that is acceptable to all employers, consumers, insurers, and health care providers. As always, please feel free to contact the Chamber with any questions. Remember, the GMCC is here to be your business advocate and your voice in Concord. In order for us to do so effectively, we need feedback from you! Please direct any questions to michaels@manchester-chamber.org or call (603) 792-4107.

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