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This week has been one of the most arduous for members of the New Hampshire House and Senate due to the number of bills scheduled for hearing as well as the critical nature of those bills. Not only have there been packed hearing rooms for bills related to the emotional subjects of abortion, gun control and labor unions but this week the House Ways and Means committee heard HB 925 relative to state and local taxes, the House Finance Committee worked on HB2 relative to state fees, funds, revenues, and expenditures while the Senate Energy Committee reviewed an amendment to SB207 which proposes fees on hazardous materials.

HB 925 proposes to dedicate to the education trust fund revenues from the following new taxes. A payroll tax on businesses with payrolls exceeding \$10,000 per week, a tax on estates exceeding \$3,000,000 (excluding farm property), a tax on gambling winnings, a luxury sales tax on motor vehicles costing \$30,000 or more and any item costing \$10,000 or more. This bill also adds an entertainment admission tax and taxes property which is not primary residential real estate at twice the rate of primary residential property. Ready for more? Read on.

HB 2 will among other things increase the tobacco tax, increase motor vehicle registration fees and increase fees of the Department of Environmental Services. In the Senate, the amendment proposed for SB207 would create a hazardous materials fund at the Department of Safety through the collection of an annual registration fee and assessment on all facilities that store or distribute hazardous materials.

Next week these committees will begin to finalize these bills and prepare to send them over to the other legislative body. Additionally, on Tuesday, March 20th the House Transportation Committee will hold a public hearing on HB802 relative to passenger restraints. This is the seatbelt bill. New Hampshire is the only jurisdiction in North America which does not presently have a seatbelt law on the books. That is likely to change this year. Public sentiment has become much stronger and more vocal on this issue, and a large coalition of public safety and health related groups, along with private sector allies, is pushing for passage.

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CHAMBER INSIGHT:

Is commuter rail finally on its way back to the Greater Manchester region?

While it is far too early in the process to be sure, restoring commuter rail to Southern NH had a pretty good week in Concord. The Senate Transportation and Interstate Cooperation Committee heard testimony Wednesday on Senate Bill 75, relative to establishing a rail transit authority. A rail transit authority would be in essence the administrative home for a future commuter rail system in New Hampshire. The transit authority's governing board would be charged with developing an operating budget, addressing funding issues, setting fares and schedules, and implementing future expansions of service.

Public input was largely positive at Wednesday's hearing. Numerous rail advocacy groups, the Greater Nashua Chamber, the Town of Merrimack, and the City of Nashua, along with the Greater Manchester Chamber testified in support of Senate Bill 75. One concern, raised by the Sierra Club, focused on SB 75's exclusivity to the southern region of the state. As the Sierra Club put it, "SB 75's language is very Nashua-Centric." While that may be true, the initial focus on Southern NH is in fact by design. By tackling the Lowell to Nashua to Manchester corridor first, the Rail Transit Authority will lay the groundwork for future expansion after the system is operational. The issue of the composition of the Rail Transit Authority governing board was also discussed by the committee. Some were concerned that since the authority was to be a statewide entity it should perhaps have additional statewide members.

In response to the public input from the hearing, the Senate Transportation Committee amended SB 75 to title the Rail Transit Authority as the "South-Central Rail Transit Authority" and to increase the gubernatorial appointment to the governing board to 2 members with past rail experience. The amended version of SB 75 was moved as "ought to pass" by the committee and will be considered by the full Senate next week.

While SB 75 will likely be closely securitized by the full Senate, the bill appears to enjoy broad support, including the backing of Majority leader Sen. Joe Foster. Thus far legislators appear to agree that SB 75 is a necessary and logical next step in restoring commuter rail service to Southern NH. Capitol Insight will keep you posted on SB 75 as it continues to move through the legislature.

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