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Fwd: Capitol Watch: Senators Urge Further Negotiation on School Consolidation Bill

1 message

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May Board Meeting

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **IASA** <iasa@iasaedu.org>
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To: <jbauer@panaschools.com>



May 16, 2019

Senators Urge Further Negotiation on School Consolidation Bill

Thank you to all superintendents who made their voice heard on HB 3053, the latest effort at forced school consolidation in Illinois.

At Wednesday's Senate committee hearing, Senators said they listened to numerous concerns about the legislation from stakeholders. Those calls made a difference because several Senators commented they oppose the bill, if not changed.

What happened Wednesday in the Senate Government Accountability and Pensions Committee is not uncommon. HB 3053 was passed out of committee but with great reservations from the committee members and on the condition it has to be brought back to committee with an amendment before it would move further.

Right now, it faces a tough road ahead with concerns from the Alliance, Illinois Education Association, Illinois Federation of Teachers and Illinois State Board of Education all opposed. The committee directed the bill sponsor, Sen. Tom Cullerton, D-Villa Park, to work with the groups on a compromise. There is a meeting scheduled for Friday, May 17th at 1 p.m.

We'll see how that goes. Our position is clear that consolidation should be a local decision. At the committee, Cullerton noted he already planned to bring back an amendment to change the structure of the task force so it can have more local input.

In his own words, Cullerton doesn't believe a member of the task force from DuPage County should tell someone in Cairo what to do.

It is possible additional changes could occur to the legislation as discussions progress.

Several senators disliked how many school districts the task force would recommend for consolidation. As currently written, the task force would identify, before May 1, 2020, no less than 25 percent of school districts in Illinois that would be required to hold a referendum to consolidate in the next general election.

According to ISBE, more than 200 school districts would qualify. I want to give much appreciation to Amanda Elliott, director of legislative affairs at ISBE, for her testimony Wednesday.

"The work it would take to evaluate over 200 consolidations in less than a year would not be possible for us to do in that amount of time to get on the November 2020 ballot," Elliott told the committee.

Elliott also raised a concern we have mentioned previously in Capitol Watch about the potentially enormous costs associated with consolidation.

Currently, the state offers incentives to school districts to consolidate because elementary and high school districts often have different pay scales, and when they merge, their current collective bargaining agreements are dissolved. What happens next, during new negotiations, is the district on the lower wage scale gravitates toward the higher wage scale.

The school districts would be on the hook for an ungodly sum of money. And, it gets worse.

The current language directs the task force to give a specification of the maximum tax rates the affected districts could levy. Just think about that.

We will keep you updated on this legislation, but I think our message is resonating with senators. Thanks to all of you.

As we head into the final weeks of the scheduled session this is how things are shaping up overall.

Gov. JB Pritzker has put forth a number of proposals that would significantly alter the landscape of Illinois, including changing the state income tax system, legalizing marijuana, instituting sports betting and enacting other tax increases on such items like cigarettes, plastic bags and successful video-gaming businesses. The governor also wants a tax-supported capital bill, which GOP leaders support - but not in its current form.

His budget relies on those increases passing, so, needless to say, these next two weeks will be interesting.

In the House, the Appropriation Committees, along with Pension and Revenue & Finance Committees, have been working to develop initial recommendations. These committees are made up of Democrats, Republicans and the Governor's office and are working in a bipartisan way to propose budgets on currently available revenue, a menu of potential revenue enhancements, program expansions and pension reform ideas.

The Senate is on a parallel path developing its own recommendations.

At some point within the next two weeks the real work begins with all four caucuses from both Chambers working with the Governor to craft a final budget that can be passed and signed into law.

Rick Pearson, a reporter for the Chicago Tribune, provided a good analogy today to keep in mind.

"Trade-offs for votes has always been part of the legislative process. As it is tweaked, each bill represents its own game of Jenga - a piece pulled one way affects the other pieces, and

threatens the bill's ability to succeed. But at this point in May, all of the issues and all of the bills become intertwined."

Some good news for a change, you may have seen Pritzker dropped plans to defer nearly \$1 billion in required payments to state pension funds this year after income tax receipts in April were \$1.14 billion above the figure of April 2018, and \$1.5 billion more than "conservative" earlier projections. What this means is that the state will be able to meet the entire \$9.1 billion in certified payments to the pensions systems.

We strongly opposed underfunding the state's pension payment, so we are glad to see the governor has changed his mind.

Thanks for reading.

Sincerely,

Diane Hendren
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