

1-27-2017

Hello Sublette County, this is Albert Sommers reporting from Cheyenne on Friday, January 27. Today in Committee of the Whole we debated multiple bills, including HB 152, Cigarette Tax. This bill would increase the cigarette tax from 60 cents to 90 cents a pack. The tax would generate about \$9 million annually, and would still put Wyoming far below our neighboring states' cigarette tax. South Dakota, for example, taxes cigarettes at \$1.53/pack. It has been estimated that smoking-related health issues cost Wyoming \$40 million annually, which means this tax would barely scratch the surface. I voted for this tax in Committee of the Whole, but I am interested in the views of Sublette County citizens on this topic. The tax revenue would go to the General Fund; I think it should be put toward education, instead, because that is where our greatest shortfall exists.

Other bills we heard in Committee of the Whole included a bill that changed how the money flows for court-ordered placement of students, a bill that would create an opportunity for a new trial based upon actual innocence, a bill that creates a framework to establish rules and a board for practitioners of acupuncture and Oriental medicine, and a bill that would shore up the reserve account for the Hathaway Scholarship Fund.

We also passed two bills in the Appropriations Committee, and then through Committee of the Whole, which increase license and registration fees for vehicles and drivers. This is part of the grand plan to move the Wyoming Department of Transportation off General Fund dollars, and back onto its own account. It is not a straight shifting of funds, because we cut about \$10 million from WYDOT in this move. Similar bills will raise other user-based fees as we take pressure off the General Fund during the budget process. We have to find a way to trim \$100 million from the next standard General Fund budget for state agencies, if we intend to match expenditures with revenues.

House Bill 236, the omnibus K12 school finance bill which I helped create, starts down a path to solve our education deficits. This bill looks at cuts, taxes, savings, and money shifts to get a handle on our upcoming \$400 million annual education funding deficit. The cuts would be brought in over a three-year period, and the taxes would not go into effect until our Rainy Day

account is reduced by \$1 billion to \$500 million. The cuts and taxes would total about \$80 million annually. There may be changes in how we cut. For instance, we are now considering a flat percentage reduction instead of breaking into the model.

I appreciate all of the correspondence I received in the past week, and I apologize if I haven't replied to an e-mail.

Thanks