

3-10-2018

Hello Sublette County, this is Albert Sommers reporting to you from Cheyenne. On Saturday, March 10, the House was in session until 11:30 PM, as the Legislature worked two remaining bills: state capital construction and education finance. The Joint Conference Committee on HB1, the budget bill, had reached a compromise Friday. We voted and passed the budget through the House with a vote of 38-20; the Senate passed the budget bill as well.

HB194 is the state capital construction bill, which was the primary sticking point between the House and the Senate. Discussions eventually narrowed down to one topic: funding for the University of Wyoming's Science Initiative. This money had already been saved and set aside over the course of several years, but this bill authorizes the final spending authority for the projects. The House wanted to provide 100 percent spending authority, but the Senate wanted to fund only to 75 percent and make UW find the other 25 percent elsewhere. In the end, the decision was made to fund the UW project at 85 percent, a compromise all parties can live with.

HB140, education finance, was also hanging in limbo until late Saturday evening. This bill will cut about \$27.2 million from K12 education. The cut will be made by adjusting how students are counted, by changing the way funding is generated from the square footage of buildings, by slightly altering which special education employees are eligible for extra hazardous worker's compensation, and by freezing special education funding for two years. The Senate had proposed cuts to education that could have exceeded \$100 million, and had crafted two constitutional amendments that, in my opinion, would have eliminated Wyoming students' fundamental right to an equitable and adequate education. The House did not pass the Senate's cuts or its call for constitutional amendments. The House had maintained that we would not support any cuts to K12 education, unless they were in conjunction with a broader solution for education funding. HB194, state capital construction, included that compromise as well. It committed a portion of our investment earnings from our Permanent Mineral Trust Fund to K12 major maintenance.

The budget bill that passed both bodies also diverted some existing revenue streams to education, one of which was 33 percent of state royalties from state lands. The movement of the 33 percent state royalties to K12 capital construction, plus guaranteeing the use of investment earnings for K12 major maintenance, solves the funding issues for K12 capital construction. Remember, Wyoming had previously funded K12 major maintenance and capital construction out of revenues received from federal Coal Lease Bonus money, which has been eliminated since the federal government quit issuing new coal leases.

We reached a compromise late last night on all of the major issues, but our staff did not have time to finish the final products for official approval. The Legislature will return to complete the session on Wednesday, March 14 and Thursday, March 15 for final votes, including review of any line item vetoes the Governor may make on HB1 and HB194. I will not attend next Wednesday, as I have another commitment.

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Thank you