

1-19-2019

Hello Sublette County, this is Albert Sommers reporting to you from Cheyenne on Saturday the 19th. I have been extremely busy during the development of the budget, and I have not provided a great deal of detail on bills of interest to our community. I thought this would be a good opportunity to fill you in.

The Joint Appropriations Committee (JAC) finished final motions on the budget bill yesterday, and we will likely vote on the bill next Tuesday. It is customary after gubernatorial elections for JAC to take recommendations from both the previous and incoming Governor (in this case, Mead and Gordon) as the base motion during Committee workup of the budget. Then we approve, amend, or vote down the Governors' requests, depending on the JAC's priorities for Wyoming. Later the budget bill is subject to a vote of the entire Legislature and ultimately to line item vetoes by the Governor.

In developing the budget, the House and Senate Appropriations Committees can each have their own priorities, which may conflict. The House has more members on the Committee, so it can out-vote the Senate on amendments. We try to negotiate our differences, but this time, in the end, the House and Senate had differences of opinions on many budget items. The House successfully brought several amendments: one adds an inflationary adjustment to the K12 education budget, in response to the K12 funding model providing insufficient resources after recent cuts; another would require a study of Medicaid Expansion for specific populations, like for mental health services, which cost the state millions of dollars; and another amendment would require a study of whether our State health plan for state employees could be expanded to include other populations in Wyoming, like small business. The cost of health care in Wyoming is incredibly high, and the Legislature needs to keep searching for solutions.

The Joint Appropriations Committee also creates a separate state capital construction bill, which includes construction projects for the University of Wyoming, Community Colleges, and all other major state construction. I placed an amendment into this bill that would set aside

\$4.2 million for construction of more wildlife crossing projects, like the Trappers Point project, but with the condition that this money be matched with money from the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD), Wyoming Department of Transportation (WYDOT), and local government or non-governmental organizations. Two years ago, I attended a workshop in Pinedale hosted by the WGFD, WYDOT, and wildlife advocacy groups designed to prioritize highway segments that had the highest rates of vehicle collisions with wildlife. This is a great effort, but there are no funding sources outside of federal highway dollars and private philanthropy. This is my attempt to stimulate matching dollars that will continue the process of protecting our wildlife, ourselves and our cars. We must also continue to prudently build in Wyoming to advance the state and replace buildings that are past their useful lifespans.

I wish to review a few bills of interest that have so far passed the House and moved to the Senate. My bill, HB12, would give the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission the authority to set the date and timing of shed antler seasons. The midnight opening on May 1 has caused safety and enforcement issues, and unseasonably late springs cause animals to stay later on the winter range.

HB2 would give the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission the authority to regulate a limited number of emerging technologies that impact the “fair chase” principle of hunting. This bill passed the House yesterday with my support. It was really a continuation of a bill I brought two years ago. At that time, people out-of-state were putting photographs of specific big mule deer bucks in the Wyoming Range on their website, and for a price would provide a map or GPS location showing where those bucks were hiding in the summer/fall. Clearly, the WGFD needs the ability to regulate an ever-changing string of new technologies. For example, we currently don’t allow hunters to utilize aircraft or drones to scout for game in real-time. I supported this bill.

Other hunting bills this session include one that lowers the hunting age to 10, and a couple that amend the statutes on preference points.

A few tax bills have been developed and introduced in the Legislature to help alleviate Wyoming's structural deficit in education funding, though much of the proposed revenue is aimed toward the General Fund. The Lodging Tax bill, designed to move the Department of Tourism off the General Fund, passed the House. I supported this bill, because 85 percent of this tax is paid by out-of-state individuals. House Bill 67 will hit the Appropriations Committee early next week; this bill would lower the sales tax rate to 3.5 percent, but would eliminate the exemption on the food tax and would extend sales tax to many services. Our state has seen a shift away from sales of goods to sales of services, and this bill is designed to modernize that revenue flow. I will likely vote in favor of this bill in committee, so the bill can be debated by the whole House, but I am not convinced I will vote for the bill in the end. I have received comments from real estate agents who oppose the bill, but I look forward to feedback from all Sublette folk.

Bills are being drafted to tax vapes, which are not currently taxed under the tobacco tax statutes. Teenage use of vapes has become a huge concern for parents, teachers, and prevention specialists, with estimates that over 35 percent of high school students in Sublette County could be vaping. Vaping devices are easily disguised, which allows more access in schools. Society spent decades lowering the nicotine addiction in our youth, and now these new products have the potential to hook millions of young people on a very addictive drug.

There has been discussion about a bill that would index the fuel tax to inflation. This has the advantage of fuel tax increases coming in small doses, instead of in ten-cents-per-gallon increases when we are desperate to find money for highway maintenance. Highways are the life blood of Wyoming's economy, as we have no other way to move around the state. I am not sure whether this bill will be filed.

Finally, there is a host of social bills that have been numbered for introduction or floating around the chambers, including gun rights bills, abortion bills, and LGBTQ anti-discrimination bills.

I look forward to your comments on all bills before the Legislature. If you have sent me an email that I have not responded to, please resend and put Hey Albert in the subject line. I get over 100 emails a day, and I can miss your feedback. I can be reached at albert@albertsommers.com.

Thank you