

10/8/19

Hello Sublette County, this is Albert Sommers reporting on interim discussions of the Wyoming Legislature. I serve on the Joint Appropriations Committee (JAC), which will meet in Riverton on October 29 and 30. Every year in October the Consensus Revenue Estimating Group (CREG) puts out estimates of Wyoming's revenues for the next biennium. These projections are the baseline the Legislature and the Governor utilize to establish the state's budget. The upcoming legislative session in February will be a Budget Session. This October CREG revenue projection will be the basis for upcoming budget debates beginning in December. The Joint Appropriations Committee will meet to hear agency requests and debate the budget for two weeks in both December and January.

In October the JAC will get a report from the Department of Corrections on its efforts to stabilize the Wyoming State Prison building. This building was constructed on an old clay lake bed with expansive soils. The state has been battling prison structure problems for several years.

Also in October, the JAC will receive a report on K12 funding, and whether cost pressures will warrant any increase or decrease in K12 funding. The Joint Education Committee will make a recommendation to the JAC, and JAC will then make a recommendation to the Governor and the Legislature. The Employees and Officials Group Health Insurance program will also report to JAC on what the rate structure will look like for the upcoming year. Health insurance is a significant driver of the State's budget.

Besides being a member of JAC, I also serve on the Wyoming's Tomorrow Task Force, the Opioid Addiction Task Force, the Wyoming Broadband Advisory Council, and the Select Committee on School Facilities. Further, I have worked on Sage Grouse Mitigation in the Minerals Committee, the vapes issue in the Revenue Committee, and a discussion of overcrowding by commercially guided fishing boats on Wyoming's rivers in the Travel, Recreation, and Wildlife Committee. When you throw in spring roundup, haying, and fall roundup I have had an active several months.

The Wyoming's Tomorrow Task Force met on July 30 and more recently on September 30. This task force is looking at how other states fund traditional post-secondary students, those directly out of high school, and non-traditional students — those adults who are seeking post-secondary education after the age of 24. Our Hathaway Scholarship is an outstanding program, but is this scholarship meeting today's needs? The Legislature created a program last session called Wyoming Works, which provides grants for non-traditional students, but that funding was very limited. Is there a way we can merge the Hathaway and Wyoming Works into a more effective means to fund both traditional and non-traditional students' post-secondary needs? Can we create a better Honors Hathaway Scholarship for those students who are the best of the best? What are the costs? Can we better utilize federal dollars for disadvantaged students? These are the issues we are investigating in the Wyoming's Tomorrow Task Force.

The Opioid Addiction Task Force met on July 30, and again on September 24 in a joint meeting with the Labor, Health, and Social Services Committee. Last year the Opioid Task Force developed and successfully passed several bills during the 2019 Legislative Session. These were aimed at improving the regulatory and educational framework surrounding opioids. This interim, the Task Force produced one bill that fine-tunes work we did last session by allowing the Board of Pharmacy to share information with other state databases to ensure better control of cross-state opioid sales.

The task force's September joint meeting with the Labor/Health Committee was designed to examine mental health and substance abuse treatment challenges in Wyoming. The Legislature and state agencies are working with the Council for State Governments (CSG) to evaluate holes in Wyoming's mental health and substance abuse coverage. The Labor/Health Committee, with support from the Opioid Task Force, is requesting the CSG working group to draft legislation to address some of the challenges Wyoming faces. This legislation will be reviewed by the Labor/Health Committee at its final meeting in November. Rural Wyoming has many challenges providing adequate mental health and substance abuse treatment, and I hope some good ideas come out of that work group.

The Select Committee on School Facilities met June 12 and September 10 to review K12 school facility needs throughout Wyoming. This Select Committee relies on the School Facilities Commission to provide recommendations on the need for new schools, component level projects, and the amount of major maintenance. Component level projects are large repairs, such as a roof. The Select Committee is also examining how to define education suitability. This term is in statute and in the Supreme Court decisions regarding how we rate the needs for school facilities. Wyoming for the last several years has utilized only school condition and student capacity to evaluate when a school should be built or fixed. However, we have a statutory obligation, and perhaps a constitutional obligation, to look at education suitability. Is a particular classroom suitable for today's learning environment, does it have adequate lighting and air quality, and is it capable of providing a twenty-first-century education with the proper technology? This term seems to me a Pandora's box, because it is not clearly defined. After evaluating these issues, the Select Committee will likely bring recommendations on education suitability to the whole Legislature. This Committee will meet one more time on October 28 to finish up its work prior to the next legislative session.

Thank you. I can be reached at [albert@albertsommers.com](mailto:albert@albertsommers.com) or by phone at 307-360-7060.