

3-6-2020

Hello Sublette County, this is Albert Sommers reporting to you from Cheyenne on the twentieth day of the 2020 Budget Session. We have four scheduled days left for session, meaning we should wrap up on Thursday, March 12.

A few key bills the House considered today include:

- SF 61, Omnibus water bill-planning. This bill is critical to water development projects across the state, authorizing studies and providing appropriations to projects, including one in Sublette County. I supported this bill, which passed Second Reading in the House today.
- SF0092, Volunteer pension account – funding. This bill would appropriate the remaining gross premium tax levied upon fire insurance premiums, which will cost the state about \$800,000 per year, and deposit the tax into the volunteer firefighter, EMT and search and rescue pension account, instead of into the State’s General Fund. The bill would also require a larger monthly contribution from members of this pension account. These actions will create a structurally sound pension plan for volunteers, with the hope that the pension will incentivize recruitment of more volunteers. I supported this bill and it passed Second Reading in the House.
- SF 106, Lifetime game and fish licenses, amends requirements for the complimentary issuance of lifetime bird, small game and fish licenses, providing licenses for residents who are disabled veterans, recipients of the United States military purple heart medal or residents over 65 who have lived in Wyoming for over 30 years. I supported this bill which passed on Second Reading.
- SF0069, Rural health care district authority, allows rural health care districts to construct and operate a nursing home. Senator Fred Baldwin and I co-sponsored this bill, because it provides more options for Sublette County’s health care decision makers. The bill passed Third Reading in the House, and will be headed to the Governor’s desk.

As members of the House and Senate continued the session in their respective chambers, those of us on the Joint Conference Committee worked together to negotiate a compromise on the Budget bill. In the end, the House and Senate disagreed on three areas: K12 education funding; community college funding; and distribution of a \$200 million 1-percent severance tax flow that in past years had been utilized either for expenditure or savings.

The most divisive issue was the Senate's decision to cut funding to K12 education. For the past several sessions, the Senate has tried to cut funding to education in order to reduce our structural deficit in education funding. The House believes that education is one of the most critical functions of state government, and that we can't cut education further and still provide an adequate, constitutional education for each child in Wyoming.

On community college funding, the Senate added \$13 million more to fund community colleges than did the House.

Finally, the Senate wanted to direct the \$200 million severance tax flow to our Permanent Wyoming Mineral Trust Fund, where it could not be spent, while the House, recognizing the financial cliff we could face in 4 years, wanted to set it aside to be utilized if the State needs it.

After hours of debate, negotiations, and failed motions, the Senate and House agreed to split each position exactly in half to reach a compromise. On Monday, members of the Conference Committee will take this compromise back to their respective chambers and sell it to the body, as House and Senate will vote separately on the negotiated budget. Normally, if both bodies pass the budget, the Governor has three days to line-item-veto the budget. However, this year the Governor has agreed to take only two days, to allow any vetoes to be reviewed for potential override by the Legislature on Thursday, the last day of the session.

As always, I can be reached with questions or concerns at albert@albertsommers.com. Thank you.