

11/22/2021

Hello Sublette County, this is Albert Sommers reporting to you from interim work of the 66th Legislature. This past week was busy. On November 15 and 16, I participated in the Joint Education Committee meeting in Cheyenne. On November 17, I met via Zoom with legislators from Uinta, Lincoln, and Teton Counties to discuss redistricting. On November 18, I was a panelist at the 2021 Governor's Business Forum in Cheyenne, and later that day I participated via Zoom in a Wildlife Taskforce meeting held in Casper.

At the Governor's Business Forum, I was part of a discussion on the State's revenues. I gave an overview of where we have been recently with respect to state revenues, where we are now, and where I think the numbers lead us. This overview is condensed into the next two paragraphs.

Within days of the Legislature leaving Cheyenne in March 2020, the pandemic shut the nation down, which drove oil prices into negative territory, and we knew Wyoming and the nation were in a pickle. By May 2020, the economy was so bad that the Consensus Revenue Estimating Group convened outside of its regular timeframe to adjust the revenue projections for the State of Wyoming. That CREG report, under its middle-of-the-road projection for General Fund and K12 revenues through FY2022, showed a \$1.5 billion decline compared to projections made just five months before. Further, this \$1.5 billion drop in revenue was anticipated to result in an \$877 million budget shortfall by the end of FY2022. After improving revenue projections in October 2021, the Governor recommended a 2021 supplemental budget that included General Fund reductions of about \$446M through FY2022 and the end of the current biennium. In my four years on the Joint Appropriations Committee, which spanned three biennia, the Legislature cut more than \$900M from the State's General Fund budget, so that the current General Fund budget now totals around \$2.6 billion.

This past summer, natural gas prices, oil prices, and sales tax collections recovered remarkably. The federal government responded to the pandemic crisis by pumping money to the states through the CARES and ARPA Acts, and the federal government continues to pour money into the system. Based upon these improving state revenues and federal money, the Legislature will

have about \$1.2 billion of state dollars to appropriate during the upcoming Budget Session. Approximately \$862 million of this total is arguably “one-time” (from conserved GF under ARPA and the extreme spike in oil and natural gas prices) and approximately \$312 million a biennium could be considered “on-going.” It’s crazy how we went from an \$877 million budget shortfall in May 2020 to a \$1.2 billion surplus today. Based upon these new projections, the K12 structural shortfall of \$300M/year at the end of the 2021 General Session could shrink to a shortfall of only \$75M/year.

What should Wyoming do with \$862M in one-time state dollars and another partially restricted \$644 million in federal ARPA dollars? The Joint Education Committee (JEC) has asked, “how can we improve educational opportunities in Wyoming?” Many of us in the Legislature do not want to utilize one-time dollars to create unsustainable programs, but we can create endowments that spin off income for a variety of needs. The JEC will sponsor legislation during the 2022 Budget Session that would create endowments for an adult education scholarship and for community college funding. Both endowments would be designed to improve workforce development in Wyoming. Further, JEC will sponsor a bill that increases the scholarship amount provided to students through the Hathaway Scholarship. The bill will also add money to the existing Hathaway Scholarship Endowment Fund. The JEC bills put just a nominal amount into these endowments, but will add to them during the 2022 Budget Session after we are more certain about how much money is available.

Every 10 years, the United States federal government conducts an extensive population census. Each state uses the census to apportion state legislators based on population changes. This process is called redistricting, and the Wyoming Legislature is currently realigning legislative districts based on changes in our state’s population. Sublette County had the second largest population decline of any county, losing 1,534 people. As of April 2020, the population was 8,728.

What that means for Sublette County is that my house district, HD20, will have to be enlarged significantly. On September 3, the Joint Corporations Committee discussed redistricting and broke the state into regions. Sublette was combined with Uinta, Lincoln, and Teton counties to

create Region 10, which encompasses eight house districts. The problem is that Region 10 does not have enough population to meet court requirements on population variance between districts. Courts have dictated that no two districts should vary by more than 10 percent to meet the US Constitution's mandate of "one person, one vote." To compound this challenge, our neighbors to the south and east, Sweetwater and Carbon counties, have also had significant population declines.

Legislators in all regions have been developing maps to be used by the Joint Corporations Committee to decide how all of the pieces of the puzzle will be put together. Region 10's preferred option will keep Sublette County whole and add a piece of Teton County to my district, House District 20. The challenge with this plan is that a couple of districts have too low a population to meet the court's variance standards. Region 10's second option would expand HD 20 to the south and pick up LaBarge and Farson, but none of Teton County. This is my preferred option, but it presents a challenge because it eliminates a house district from Carbon/Sweetwater County, and moves it to the growth area around Cheyenne. These options can be viewed at <http://www.sublettewyo.com/CivicAlerts.aspx?AID=401>. Joint Corporations Committee will meet in Cheyenne on December 1, and I will attend to help protect Sublette County interests.

The Wildlife Taskforce met in Casper on November 18. Its charge is to study top-priority wildlife policy issues facing the state related to the allocation of hunting opportunity, sportsman access and other issues. Most of the meeting addressed preference points for the Big 5 (bighorn sheep, mountain goats, moose, bison, and grizzly bear).

The Taskforce discussed the following proposal, and is seeking public comment prior to its next meeting on December 3:

- Effective January 1, 2025, all preference points held by individuals for bighorn sheep and moose will be converted to bonus points.
- Effective for the 2025-2026 season and thereafter, applicants for moose, bighorn sheep, mountain goat, and bison will earn one bonus point for each year they apply and are

unsuccessful in drawing their first choice on their application for the respective species.

- Individuals may also purchase a bonus point in years they do not apply for a license.
- Effective for the 2025-2026 season, the draw will be random, but the number of entries an individual has into the drawing for a specific species will be equal to the number of bonus points they have squared (example - 4 points = 16 entries, 10 points = 100 entries).
- Bonus points will be converted to history (or lost) as before if individuals fail to apply for two years.
- Specific rules and regulations to be developed and promulgated by the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission.

I did not support this proposal, because I heard from no hunters in my area who supported moving to a bonus point system. This proposal does create more opportunity and better odds to draw, but takes away certainty for some hunters who have accumulated points. Please submit comments on this preference point proposal to the Wildlife Taskforce members at <https://sites.google.com/wyo.gov/wyomingwildlifetaskforce/home/taskforce-topics>.

I can be reached at [albert@albertsommers.com](mailto:albert@albertsommers.com) with questions or comments.