

UNDER THE DOME

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Assembly to Consider High-Capacity Well, Homelessness Legislation

The state Assembly will be in session May 2nd to take up a series of bills, including proposals aimed at addressing the issue of homelessness. Under the package of legislation, unveiled by GOP lawmakers, an inter-agency council would be created to study the problem and make recommendations, grants would be provided to local governments to set-up workforce training programs, and a pilot program created to help chronically homeless people on waiting lists for state housing assistance. Legislation revamping state regulations for high-capacity wells and another providing additional funding for broadband expansion grants are also scheduled for a vote. Both have passed the Senate, however, the broadband bill the Assembly plans to take-up does not include an amendment the Senate adopted that would prohibit telecommunications providers from collecting and keeping certain information from customers. The legislature's Joint Finance Committee met to approve the Assembly version. Finally, Assembly Majority Leader Jim Steineke has said the body will likely calendar a vote on two remaining bills that are part of the HOPE Agenda and special session on opioid abuse that Governor Walker called for in January. Those measures would provide immunity for drug possession to a person who calls 911 to report another person who is experiencing a drug overdose. The other bill would allow family members, friends, and others to go through the emergency and involuntary commitment process for a drug-addicted individual, in the same manner current law allows for alcohol addiction.

Joint Finance Committee Budget Work Scheduled

The legislature's budget committee will go into executive session and begin voting on the 2017-19 state budget on May 1st. Their agenda includes the governor's proposed transfer of the Judicial Commission to the Supreme Court and elimination of the Judicial Council, along with budgets for the Circuit Courts, Court of Appeals, and Supreme Court. Other agency budgets before the committee include the Employment Relations Committee, Division of Gaming at the Department of Administration, Office of Commissioner of Insurance (OCI), Board for People with Developmental Disabilities, the Board on Aging and Long-term Care, and the Environmental Improvement Fund. Under OCI, the legislature is expected to approve the governor's proposal to cease operations of the state's local government property insurance fund. The Local Government Property Insurance Fund (LGPIF) was created to provide affordable insurance options to local governments, however, the increased availability of private insurance options has led the governor and Republicans in the legislature to push for ending the fund. The Co-chairs of Joint Finance Committee recently announced a tentative calendar for budget sessions they plan to hold throughout the remainder of the month, including the following dates: May 1st, 9th, 11th, 16th, 18th, 23rd, 25th, and 30th.

GOP Attorney Asks Supreme Court to Overturn Redistricting Ruling

A decision by a federal panel to throw out state Assembly district maps due to partisan gerrymandering is being challenged at the U.S. Supreme Court level by Republican lawmakers who drew the maps. Attorneys representing the GOP argued in an amicus brief that a recent federal court ruling would threaten state autonomy as federal courts would end up drawing maps in most instances, which would bring about confusion and ultimately costly litigation. A three-judge federal panel earlier this year struck down the GOP maps, in place since 2011, and ordered state lawmakers to draw new ones by November, in time for the 2018 elections. The brief also urges the Supreme Court to throw out the ruling based on the panel's decision to agree with Democrat's argument that votes should be evaluated based on an "efficiency gap." Under that theory, a standard would be set for measuring a partisan gerrymander by looking at a district based on how many votes are wasted because voters from either party are packed into districts.

Upcoming Session Days

The Senate and Assembly are both expected to have floor session on Tuesday, May 2nd and Wednesday, May 10th.

Campus Freedom of Expression Proposal Debated

A GOP-led effort to require the UW System to clarify campus freedom of expression policies and sanction students violating rights of others is drawing praise from conservatives who argue the bill is needed to ensure students can listen to constitutionally protected speech on campus regardless of what the subject is. Under the bill, dubbed the Campus Free Speech Act, authored by Rep. Jesse Kremer and Sen. Sheila Harsdorf, the UW would need to put forth a statement on its commitment to intellectual freedom and free expression and set policies for students to follow. Those violating the policy would face suspension or expulsion. The issue stems in part from a national controversy over a planned speech by firebrand conservative Ann Coulter at UC Berkeley which was canceled and then reinstated, leading to protests from both supporters and opponents of Coulter. Speaker Robin Vos said he supports the proposal, arguing conservative voices are being suppressed and censored. Furthermore, he said the goal of the legislation is to increase the opportunity for more speech on campus regardless of a person's viewpoint. On the other hand, liberal group One Wisconsin Now criticized the measure, telling reporters it would create mandatory safe spaces for conservatives, who would not be held accountable for hateful language. Wisconsin's chapter of the ACLU also weighed in with a mixed reaction, arguing the penalties were unnecessary, however, they have supported similar efforts in other states. The UW is reviewing the proposal and released a statement saying they are committed to ensuring freedom of expression is allowed on campuses.

Lawmaker Introduces Financial Literacy Bills

State Sen. Chris Kapenga unveiled two pieces of legislation aimed at improving financial literacy and allowing promotion of better savings habits. The "Savings Promotion Act" authorizes financial institutions to conduct prize-linked savings promotions designed to encourage savings by adding a promotional feature to personal savings accounts. The other measure directs school boards to develop a set of financial literacy standards for students, to help them navigate personal financial decisions. Kapenga in a press release said individual financial responsibility benefits society and the bills he has put forth will help promote smart money management.

Building Commission Approves Projects

The state Building Commission met to consider a series of proposed construction projects at state agencies and the UW System. The Commission voted to approve infrastructure maintenance and repairs for the Department of Military Affairs, construction of a fieldhouse addition at UW-Platteville, renovation of a student center at UW-River Falls, construction of a rec facility at UW-Madison, and various maintenance and repair projects at several other UW campuses. Governor Walker released a statement after the meeting concluded thanking members of the Commission for moving forward with the important projects.

Democrats Seek Universal Background Checks on Gun Purchases

A group of Democratic lawmakers at a press conference in the state Capitol announced their plans to introduce legislation requiring universal background checks on gun purchases. Flanked by several advocacy groups, the lawmakers, led by state Rep. Terese Berceau, said the legislation is needed to ensure reasonable safeguards are in place to protect the public. The measure would close the so called "Gun Show Loophole" by requiring licensed gun dealers to run background checks on all buyers. A coalition was recently formed in the state called the WI Coalition for Gun Safety which organizers said will work to counter Republican proposals to water down the state's gun laws. Their efforts come as a group of Republicans recently introduced what would allow people to carry concealed weapons without a state permit. The Democratic proposal is not expected to advance, while prospects for the concealed carry bill are uncertain.