

This was a history making week at the General Assembly. Former Speaker Jim Black (D-Matthews) pleaded guilty in federal court yesterday to corruption charges. His sentencing is now scheduled for May. I will report to you should the Black investigation involve any additional indictments. Rep. Black has resigned his seat, and a successor to his seat should be appointed by the Governor shortly.

New Speaker Joe Hackney announced his committee appointments this week, and the House Insurance Committee will be staffed by a number of holdovers from last session. Representatives Hugh Holliman (D-Lexington) and Bruce Goforth (D-Asheville) will be the committee's Co-Chairmen. Vice-Chairman will be four in number, and include Republicans Jerry Dockham and Mitchell Setzer and Democrats Angela Bryant and Margaret Dickson. Democrats on the committee are Nelson Cole, Bill Faison, Garland Pierce, Drew Saunders, Ronnie Sutton, William Wainwright and Thomas Wright. Republicans include David Almond, John Blust, Bill Current, Julia Howard, David Lewis and Trudi Walend. Democrats outnumber Republicans on the committee by 11 to 8.

Committee activity has so far been understandably modest, but that will change in the coming weeks. Several bills of interest or potential interest were introduced this week, and include the following:

SB 163 and SB 177 - Establish High Risk Pool. Both of these bills seeks to establish a high risk pool, and to a great degree are patterned after last session's HB 1895. Please click on the attachment above to pull up a memorandum analyzing the differences between these two bills. They would both include all insurers *and* the State Health Plan in the assessment base, which may prove to be important in getting this base as broad as possible. I would expect Rep. Insko's risk pool bill to be introduced in the House next week. It is now being fine tuned by legislative staff, which has solicited our input and that of the DOI and Blue Cross. It is a positive step that this legislation is ready for consideration as the committees are just starting to being their deliberations.

SB 156 - Term Limits. Sen. David Hoyle (D-Gastonia) has long been interested in limiting the amount of time that the General Assembly can be in session. His bill would limit "long" sessions to 135 calendar days and "short" sessions to 60 calendar days. A vote of the people to amend the Constitution would be required to bring about this change. Note that 12 Senators are co-sponsoring this bill. There is bipartisan support among the sponsors, and several Senate leaders will be pushing for this change.

Several bills outside the immediate area of our traditional focus may interest you. **HB 244 - Civil Jury Selection/Equal Challenges** would require trial judges to make sure that the number of juror challenges is equal when juries are being selected. **SB 180 - Alternate Jurors/Jury Trial Deliberations** would permit an alternate juror to replace a juror who is unable to perform the juror's duties, is disqualified or is discharged for misconduct during deliberations by the jury. Lastly, **HB 245 - Medical Malpractice Insurance Coverage** would establish a rating plan for physicians' medical malpractice coverage that would prohibit the use of specialties or types of practice in establishing rates and would require the pooling of all physicians licensed in this State. Rep. Bill Faison has sponsored these House bills, while Sen. Tony Rand has introduced the alternate juror legislation.

This week the DOI identified risk pool legislation and agent uniformity/reciprocity in the continuing education context as matters of interest to them for this legislative session.

The Senate and House have identified bill filing deadlines. The Senate has imposed a tighter schedule than the House. Public bills in the Senate must be filed by March 21, while public bills in the House must be filed by April 18.

I believe this gets us where we need to be for this week. Fasten your seatbelts. The pace of things will quicken, and I shall stay in touch.

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