

General Session Update from Senator Aaron Osmond

Week 4 – February 15th to February 21st, 2015

Dear Friends and Neighbors,

Can you believe that we are already half way through the General Session? A lot has happened in the last 4 weeks! I appreciate the many emails and calls I received throughout the last week. It is an honor knowing I have the chance to represent each of you! I am grateful for how engaged and involved many of you are in the process up here. Thank you!

As of last week the Legislature has had over 100 bills passed, 40 in the Senate and 64 in the House and many more are still going through the process. Since the beginning of the session we have had over 660 bills introduced and there are still many more bills to be introduced. We are also still meeting in our committees every day to vet new bills and ensure that we are asking the hard questions before a bill comes to the Senate or House Floor.

The process is quite intense. My day usually begins at 7:30am at the Capitol and goes straight through until 6pm (with an occasional opportunity to rest, eat, and think). At the end of the day it is off to a dinner event or some political evening activity. Once I get home I try to catch up on work email until about 10pm when I finally succumb to exhaustion. Fortunately, this schedule is limited to 45 days and then it's all over.

Below you will find an update on couple key items from last week and the progress on my bills. I look forward to hearing from you if you have any questions or concerns.

A little about the Budget

I have received feedback from many constituents about their desire to better understand the budget of the State of Utah. Here is a brief overview of the budgeting process.

We receive our final tax revenue estimates about mid-session every year. That happened this last Wednesday. Now that we have the actual hard numbers the final budgeting process can begin. Each of the appropriations subcommittees has submitted their lists. Like every year and in every state the list of our funding requests always exceed the available amount. It is the job of the Senators and Representatives on the Executive Appropriations Committee to whittle down the lists so they match the available funds. Remember: We operate under a constitutional balanced budget requirement in Utah. ☺

The revenue numbers look great. But even though it sounds like there is a lot of extra money, it will be allocated quickly. The state's total budget is just over \$14 billion. We are blessed to have a revenue surplus of \$739 million. Of that, \$389 million is ongoing revenue (meaning is money we can confidently count on again in future years). While we don't know the exact dollar amount each year, we know that there will be some money from this source, which is why it is called "ongoing." The remaining \$350 million is "one-time" money, which means it is a sort of unplanned bonus. This money is surplus tax revenue from last year. So it is money in excess of what we predicted would come in from tax revenue.

How Should We Spend the Budget?

There are the obvious financial priorities of education (over half of the budget is spent there), social services, and the justice system, higher education, and natural resources requirements. Additionally there are critical ongoing funding needs for transportation infrastructure and building maintenance (roads and buildings are expensive to maintain but even more expensive to re-build, which is part of the quandary we are facing

currently with the gas tax issue). And then there are numerous special funding requests for everything from historic foundations and libraries to theaters and the planetarium.

The Appropriation Subcommittees have done their work. Now the Executive Appropriations Committee (EAC) must finalize the budget. They will complete that work and present the final budget in the last week of the session. At which time we will all vote on that final budget (and make any last minute changes where necessary). This process is something that I take very seriously--just as you would seriously consider the allocation of any money or extra money in your own household budget.

Let me know if you have any questions or concerns about the appropriations process as we move forward.

Understanding the Legislative Process – More Insights ...

As part of my ongoing theme I felt that I could provide an insider's view on how the Hill works this time of year. This last week some of my constituents asked about me about the purpose of lobbyists and the role they play up here at the Capitol. Here are my thoughts on their role ...

Why Do We Have Lobbyists?

When we hear the word Lobbyist it often comes with a bad connotation and sometimes for a good reason. However there are many valuable roles a lobbyist can play in the legislative process. A lobbyist is a person who is usually hired by a company, city, or association whose goals are to ensure that legislation or appropriations will benefit the organizations they represent.

As a Legislator we often meet with these individuals to discuss important bills. The reason we meet with lobbyists is because many of them have years of experience in the particular field for which they are lobbying. There are lobbyists that represent everything from typical "big corporations" to hospitals, schools, law enforcement agencies, religions and many other groups who provide services throughout our state. Because legislation can range across a broad area of topics, it can sometimes prove useful to speak with these individuals for insight on a specific issue.

The goal of this overview is not to defend lobbyists but to inform those who may not know exactly what they do. I stand firm in the decisions that I make in regards to legislation. I study the issues and listen to all sides. In the end, I will always make the decision I feel is best for those I represent. My belief is that the most important people I hear from are my constituents. I view your feedback as the priority that influences my vote. But Lobbyists can and do help me in making an informed decision.

Visitors Last Week on the Hill-

On Wednesday- We proudly honored WW II Veterans with the Utah Honor Flight, this remarkable program allows Utah's veterans to be able to fly back to Washington D.C. to visit the memorials created in their honor. Part of the citation reads "there is a debt that none of us will ever repay." "We wish to the Utah Honor Flight success in its mission and express our desire to help preserve the legacy of our veterans so that no generation will ever forget their service". Once again we thank **ALL** our veterans past and present. Thank you!

We also honored Utah's Fallen Miners, these men and women are integral in the stability to our economy and comfort of the lives we live. Their countless hours and sacrifices in order to provide the joys and comforts we have are often overshadowed, we thank them and the families of loved ones who lost their lives working towards a better Utah

Also heard from Senator Mike Lee and Congresswoman Mia Love. Here is a link to a recap of the day: <http://www.senatesite.com/home/2-18-2015/#more-11848>

On Thursday- Senator Hatch and Congressman Bishop reported to us on the state of things from their vantage point in Washington D.C. Here is a link to each of the presentations from the Congressional Delegation that were made to us on the floor: <http://www.senatesite.com/home/congress/#more-11891>

The winners of the Senate Art Competition were recognized on the senate floor this week. Their artwork submissions were truly amazing and unique. There were almost 200 entries and awards went to 26 students. All of the entries will be on display on the third floor of the Capitol throughout the month of March. <http://www.senatesite.com/home/art-competition/#more-11822>. Two of these winners were from the Jordan School District!

Major Issues and Bills Discussed

Here is a list of some key issues that were discussed last week:

Medicaid Expansion – A Serious Issue

The decision on Medicaid expansion is definitely one of the most important and difficult decisions that I will make this session. We basically have four options:

One is the Governor's Healthy Utah plan (which is SB 164 by Senator Brian Shiozawa), the another is Senator Christensen's proposal that would offer a minimal expansion with a focus on charity care to the Medically Frail, the third is a bill from Senator Davis that would constitute full Medicaid expansion, and the fourth option is to do nothing and leave everything as it is.

It is frustrating that we have to make this decision in the first place. The federal government's implementation of Obamacare has put us in a situation that is untenable regardless of the option we chose. This will definitely be a choice between good, better and best.

Here is a link that explains the Governor's "Healthy Utah" option: <http://www.senatesite.com/home/expansion/#more-11784>

Here is a link that explains Senator Christensen's bill that was passed out of committee this week: <http://www.senatesite.com/home/charity-care/#more-11600>

And here is a graphic that shows what states in the rest of the nation have done thus far: <http://media.thestate.com/smedia/2015/02/17/14/17/12umyf.AuSt.74.jpeg>

Here is a link to Senator Hillyard's thoughts on how he might vote on the issues and why: http://www.cachevalleydaily.com/politics/article_8478333c-b6d8-11e4-85cc-333b070d72f8.html

My Position: After 4 weeks of hearing the debate on Healthy Utah I am becoming more convinced that no one can tell us what expansion of Medicaid is really going to cost our state. I am also convinced that once the benefit is offered it will be very difficult to pull back (even if we sunset the approval for 3 years out). If we think it is hard right now, imagine how hard it will be in 2 or 3 years to pull back on this benefit if we find that it is too expensive to continue. As such, my vote is now leaning towards no expansion at all (do nothing) or to support the Medically Frail (Sen. Christensen's bill).

ACTION: I ask you to please send me your feedback via email on this issue. This is the most difficult vote I have ever made in the legislature and I welcome your opinion. Send your thoughts to: aosmond@le.utah.gov.

Other Key Bills We Reviewed This Week

SJR 8 – Federal Government Oversight Changes- SJR 8 sponsored by Senator Weiler passed off the Senate floor this week. This bill is a resolution that asks Congress to adopt an amendment to the United States Constitution that would grant some method of oversight. The amendment would state that if 25% of the members from either the U.S. House or the U.S. Senate are in opposition to any proposed federal regulation rule change, they could compose a written statement of opposition. If such a concern were raised, then it would require a majority vote of both the House and the Senate to allow the regulation change process to proceed. <http://le.utah.gov/~2015/bills/static/SJR008.html>

HB 348 Rehabilitation in Utah's Prison System- This bill addresses rehabilitation and recidivism in Utah's prison system. In the last 10 years, our prison population has grown 18%. This is because almost half of the prisoners that are released from prison return within less than three years. The "tough on crime" approach led to more incarceration but hasn't helped people rehabilitate. Without sufficient rehabilitation programs and early assessments, recidivism rates are far too high. This conversation of how to help people move successfully back into society is a product of the prison relocation discussion. One of the major impetuses for a new prison is to create space for newer, better reform programs. Senator Adams, who will be the sponsor in the Senate, says of the bill, "This is about treatment vs. incarceration. Treatment works better than incarceration. It is not about policy so much as it is about people and families." Here is the bill text: <http://le.utah.gov/~2015/bills/static/HB0348.html>

Status of My Bills

Here is a summary of this week's progress on those bills I am personally sponsoring:

- **SB 33 – PUBLIC SCHOOL GRADUATION AMENDMENTS** (Status: Passed on the Senate Floor, is now onto the House). Requires public schools to better prepare kids for early graduation by providing an eighth grade student and the student's parent or guardian necessary information to do so. It also increases the centennial scholarship amount for students who graduate high school early to \$2,000.00.
- **SB 37 – DATA REPORTING REGARDING FRONT-LINE TEACHERS.** (Status: Passed in Committee, Waiting on 2nd Reading on Senate Floor). This bill requires the State Board of Education to report data to the Education Interim Committee on the number of true front-line teachers in each district and the amount of money we spend on those teachers. It also requires that this data be available on the Internet for public use. I have a commitment from the State Board of Education to try and address this issue in Board Rule, so I am holding this on 2nd Reading until that happens.
- **SB 38 – BEHAVIORAL TESTING AND TRACKING RESTRICTIONS.** (Status: Passed on the Senate floor, passed House Committee and waiting on House Vote). This bill eliminates references to behavioral testing or tracking in public schools when not related to Special Education; and makes technical changes.
- **SB 53- STATE DOMESTIC ANIMAL.** (Status: Passed in Senate Committee, waiting to be heard on the Senate Floor). This bill designates Golden Retriever as the State Domestic Animal. This bill was inspired and created with the help of the children of Daybreak Elementary.
- **SB 54- CREDIT MONITORING FOR MINORS.** (Status: Passed in Committee, waiting to be heard on the Senate Floor). This bill modifies and enacts provisions of the Consumer Credit Protection Act relating to certain minors, incapacitated adults, and protected persons, it allows for the legal guardian to

place a hold or “freeze” on the minor’s credit until they are 18. This is a bill that has been given significant help from the students of Carol Shackelford at Bingham High School.

- **SB 97- PROPERTY TAX EQUALIZATION AMENDMENTS** . (Status: Passed in Senate and is now in the House) This bill makes changes related to school property tax funding to ensure each school district is funded equitably for local property taxes. This passage of this bill is a significant step. The Senate passed the bill favorably 20 to 9. That is a strong endorsement that we need to solve this problem of property tax inequity in our state. I now look forward to the discussion in the House.
- **SB 114- BOARD OF EDUCATION COMPENSATION AMENDMENTS.** (Status: Passed in Committee, waiting to be heard on the Senate Floor). This bill requires a review of the compensation of members of the State Board of Education by the Executive Officer and Judicial Compensation Review Board. It requires the Legislature to consider the recommendations of the Board.
- **SB 116- PUBLIC SCHOOL DROPOUT RECOVERY.** (Passed in Senate Committee and waiting to be heard on Senate Floor) This bill provides for public school dropout recovery services.
- **SB 117- INTERVENTIONS FOR READING DIFFICULTIES PILOT** (Status: Passed in Committee, waiting to be heard on the Senate Floor). This bill creates a pilot program to provide interventions for students at risk for, or experiencing, reading difficulties, including dyslexia for students in kindergarten through grade 5 who are at risk.
- **SB 167- JUVENILE OFFENDER AMENDMENTS** (Status: Passed in Committee, waiting to be heard on the Senate Floor). This bill adds a specific list of previous offenses and conditions to the statute that allows for the direct filing of charges against a youth in adult court, it also adds new restrictions to the serious youth offender statute. It creates guidelines for housing a minor convicted in adult court to be in a juvenile secure facility. It also requires that the court determine that a minor is knowingly and intentionally waiving counsel if they do; and sets a presumption that juveniles are not to be shackled when appearing in court unless ordered by the court.

Well, that’s enough for this week. Thanks again for your support; I appreciate this opportunity to serve you!

My best to you and your family,
Sincerely,

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