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Friday, May 30, 2008

North Carolina & Regional - Wire

Posted on Thu, May 29, 2008

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May 29, 2008, at the North Carolina General Assembly

The Associated Press

HEADLINES:

- Subcommittees approve budget plans; no hefty pay raise for teachers in House budget
- House Finance Committee backs increase to earned income tax credit program
- Governor's plan for tax holiday on energy-efficient appliances goes to House
- Ill prisoners could be released in bill headed to Easley's desk
- Legislators file more bills (again) than ever during session since 1913

THE BRIEF:

HOUSE BUDGET: House budget writers rolled out portions of their spending plan for next year in subcommittee meetings. They recommended more money for dropout prevention programs but failed to meet expectations of Gov. Mike Easley on preschool funding and some other items. And Democratic leaders also won't meet the governor's recommendation to raise average teacher salaries by nearly 7 percent. Instead, the proposal calls for average raises of 3 percent. The education provides half of what Easley sought to increase the number of children served by his signature More at Four preschool program. House leaders said they spent less because they didn't raise new taxes like Easley wanted on alcohol and cigarettes. House Majority Leader Hugh Holliman, D-Davidson, also said the budget would contain \$50 million in tax credits. House Democrats want to vote on the full budget on the floor next week.

EARNED INCOME TAX CREDIT: A plan to increase the state's earned income tax credit for low- and working-class families was approved by the House Finance Committee. The plan would increase the credits low-income households receive by \$21 million, for a total of \$69 million annually. One of the bill's primary sponsors, Rep. William Wainwright, D-Craven, said the increase would help the hundreds of thousands of families and individuals who qualify for the credit make ends meet as they cope with ballooning bills. David Mills, the executive director of the Common Sense Foundation, a Raleigh think tank, said lawmakers should increase the credits even more because the program is so beneficial. The bill is expected to be incorporated into the House's budget, which is slated for a roll out next week.

ENERGY EFFICIENT APPLIANCES: A sales tax holiday on energy-efficient appliances - one of Gov. Mike Easley's budget proposals - earned the backing of the House Finance Committee. The plan would suspend state and local taxes on qualifying "Energy Star" appliances - including air conditioners, washers, dryers and freezers - over the first weekend in November. Supporters said the tax holiday would encourage residents to purchase the energy-efficient appliances, which are often more expensive than other appliances. But buying the pricier items will save consumers money over the life of the appliance, while reducing the state's energy consumption, said Rep. Paul Luebke, D-Durham. The three-day tax holiday would cost governments an estimated \$1.8 million in lost state and local taxes, said Luebke, one of the bill's primary sponsors. Rep. Paul Stam, R-Wake, said he supports the purpose of the bill but criticized the plan as "crazy policy" because it establishes a narrow window to purchase the products. The plan now heads to the full House for consideration.

ILL PRISONERS: The General Assembly agreed to let state officials release sick inmates who aren't dangerous as a way to free up some prison beds while shifting treatment costs away from the Correction Department. The Senate voted 44-1 to accept a few House changes to the measure and send it to Gov. Mike Easley's desk for his signature. The measure directs the state parole commission to move out prisoners who are terminally ill or suffering from age-related or other illnesses that make them no threat to public safety. The Department of Correction would make prisoner referrals to the commission based on its own medical and safety criteria.

BILLS, BILLS, BILLS: The General Assembly has once again made modern-day history. The Legislature's Bill Drafting Division said House and Senate members combined have filed 4,962 bills during the two-year session that began last year. That's just one more than the number of bills filed during the 2005-06 session. Lawmakers introduced several hundred bills this week before filing deadlines set by legislative leaders. The number of bills filed are the most since the 1913 session. The Senate has filed 2,164 bills during this two-year session, also the most since 1913.

THURSDAY'S SCORECARD:

In the Senate:

- S1657, to exempt interior design services from sales and use tax when provided in conjunction with the sale of personal property. Approved 45-0. Next: To the House.

ON THE AGENDA:

The North Carolina Coastal Federation plans a rally Wednesday at the Legislative Building to oppose efforts by some House members to disapprove new state regulations that would expand stormwater controls to 20 coastal counties. Environmentalists, home builders and local governments have been working for weeks to reach a compromise to replace the rules, which would take effect after the Legislature adjourned.

OVERHEARD:

"That has not so far gotten any traction ... that's a big problem right there." - Rep. Phil Haire, D-Jackson, co-chair of the House Appropriations Committee, explaining that Gov. Mike Easley may not receive everything he wants in the House budget proposal because the House doesn't want to raise taxes, like Easley wanted on alcohol and cigarettes to pay for mental health programs and teacher pay.

By Gary D. Robertson and Whitney Woodward.

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