

House takes on budget

Senate weighs common-law marriage

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The Sun News

Mar. 09, 2008

COLUMBIA --This week is budget week in the House, when it performs its constitutional duty to adopt the state's annual budget.

The week starts a little earlier, at 10:30 a.m. Tuesday, and members are expected to be on the floor all day through the week as long as necessary. No other business will be taken up during the week.

The lean \$7 billion budget cuts college funds, including those for Coastal Carolina University and Horry-Georgetown Technical College.

The \$10 million 2-1 matching fund for tourism promotion was left in place, but there won't be as much total money for promotion as there was this year.

There are few local allocations compared with years when revenue has been better. Among the line items is \$1 million each for Seacoast Medical Center expansion and Interstate 73/74; \$500,000 for Shared Care; \$250,000 for Little River Medical Center; and \$50,000 for the Beach Ball Classic.

Those items can change during floor debate, but it doesn't often happen. Usually there is an unsuccessful attempt to increase the cigarette tax to add more money to the budget, or to raise the \$300 limit on car sales tax.

After a demonstration last week, some lawmakers vowed to fight to get \$2.9 million back into the budget to cover Meals on Wheels for seniors who will lose them for a few months under the existing proposal.

Frank Adams, spokesman for Lt. Gov. Andre Bauer, said Horry County has among the largest number of clients in the program that provides hot meals to seniors who can't get out of their homes and have difficulty making their own meals.

In the Senate

As the Senate adjourned Thursday, Luke Rankin was filibustering against the recurring attempt to end the recognition of common-law marriage in South Carolina.

It isn't the first time that Rankin, R-Myrtle Beach, has filibustered against the bill. Two years ago, he prevented passage of the proposal by taking the same stance. The other senators did not have a majority to stop him, so the bill died.

Rankin, an attorney, said he strongly believes that common-law marriage should continue to be an option for people. South Carolina is one of only a handful of states that still recognize common-law marriage.

A marriage isn't given common-law status until it is challenged in court, Rankin said during his speech Thursday. These challenges usually happen after one of the partners or a child dies and there is a dispute over property.

A court can find that a common-law marriage existed under circumstances that include filing joint income tax returns, referring publicly to each other as husband and wife, or telling people that they consider themselves married.

There is no compelling reason to do away with that option for people who choose not to have a formal marriage ceremony, Rankin said.

Sen. Larry Martin, R-Pickens, is pressing the case for changing the law. The House already passed the bill, as it has done several times in recent years.

Martin said the S.C. Baptist Convention, Family Alliance, S.C. Association of Counties and many others support changing the law, as do the probate judges and magistrates who often have to deal with issue of whether people are married.

Why not make it clear, by requiring a marriage certificate, to recognize a marriage in a court dispute, Martin said.

Some want the law changed to guard the sanctity of marriage, but Martin said that is not his concern as much as the legal problems.

Rankin said the legal problems are insignificant because if a couple has done the things required for a common-law marriage, it will be recognized by a court.

Martin said the debate will continue this week, but he does not think he can get enough votes to stop Rankin's filibuster and force the bill to a vote, so it will probably die again.

In committees

The Parks, Recreation and Tourism budget will be reviewed by a Senate Finance Committee subcommittee at 9 a.m. Wednesday in Room 407 of the Gressette Senate Office Building.

The budget includes PRT's tourism promotion funds. The Senate could attempt to put more into promotion money, as requested by the governor and tourism groups, or could cut the funds in its own version of the bill.

At 9:30 a.m. Wednesday in Room 307 Gressette, a subcommittee will hold a hearing on a House bill calling for a referendum on a proposal guaranteeing the right to hunt.

The measure has come up for the past eight years. Last time, Sen. Dick Elliott, D-North Myrtle Beach, blocked it saying it was not needed and comparing it to proposing a law that allows people to go to church.

At 2:30 p.m. Tuesday, the Senate Judiciary Committee takes up a bill requiring all candidates for office, including city and county councils and school boards, to pass drug tests.

Resolutions asking for an extension of time to comply with the federal Real ID law are also on the agenda.

The law imposes stricter requirements to obtain a driver's license and if the state does not get an extension or go along with the federal law, South Carolinians will have to use passports to board planes and enter some federal buildings.

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