

Posted on Sun, Feb. 11, 2007

WEEK IN THE LEGISLATURE

Lawmakers debate DOT changes

By Zane Wilson
The Sun News

COLUMBIA - Department of Transportation reform and wind insurance dominated discussion in the Statehouse last week, and both issues will continue in high profile.

House and Senate committees working on revamping the way the DOT is governed seem to be reaching agreement that the agency's board should be chosen from the state's seven engineering districts instead of from the six congressional districts.

However, the members would be voted on by all legislators, not just those who live in the commission district, and members would need to have certain qualifications and go through screening under the bill the Senate Transportation Committee is proposing.

Horry and Georgetown counties are in the highway engineering district with most of the Pee Dee counties: Darlington, Dillon, Florence, Marion, Marlboro and Williamsburg.

Rep. Thad Viers, R-Myrtle Beach, said Horry County may be better off in that district because the Pee Dee shares many road needs, such as Interstate 73.

But Viers and most of the other local legislators do not support giving the governor the power to appoint the director of the DOT as both bills now suggest. Gov. Mark Sanford has said the DOT should be a Cabinet agency as it is in most other states, with him controlling the director or commission chairman or both.

Sanford currently names the commission chairman but has no other direct control over the agency or its budget.

Sen. Luke Rankin, R-Myrtle Beach, said the difficulties at the Insurance Department, which is a Cabinet agency, show that governors should not have more power.

At the Senate Transportation Committee meeting last week, Rankin expressed those views as the bill was up for discussion.

"I am really concerned about the appointment of the head of the DOT being conceded to the governor," he said. He also did not think the director should be an at-will employee of the governor but should have some protection like the chief of the state Law Enforcement Division and Division of Public Safety.

Sen. Hugh Leatherman, R-Florence, said he agreed with Rankin and would propose providing protection for the DOT chief.

"We want to see politics out of the DOT and professionalism in there," Leatherman said.

Sen. Dick Elliott, D-North Myrtle Beach, said he isn't sure that a commission from engineering districts complies with one-person, one-vote constitutional requirements.

Sen. Larry Grooms, R-Bonneau, who chaired the subcommittee that drew up the bill, said members were advised the arrangement will pass muster if the entire legislature is electing the commission and not just those from their district.

Elliott said he wanted more legal study on that issue.

The plan also changes the director's title to secretary of transportation and divides the agency's duties. The secretary would be responsible for day-to-day management of the agency, and the commission would set priorities, determine how to pay for them and oversee contracts.

The change would affect some counties' representation on the commission. Sen. John Hawkins, R-Spartanburg, said his county has a commissioner every four years because his congressional district contains only Spartanburg, Greenville and Union counties and a sliver of Laurens.

It is the smallest congressional district geographically in the state.

The county would be in an engineering district with several others.

"That's something that's a real concern because Spartanburg is a major industrial hub," Hawkins said. Rural counties could dominate the commission, he said.

Leatherman said that's true of all the engineering districts. If each county has a representative in turn, "we'd get one about every 40 years."

As for representation for Horry and Georgetown counties and the rest of the 1st District on the current DOT commission, legislators made no progress this week on who should fill the vacancy created when the state Supreme Court said the existing commissioner was illegally elected to a second term.

Georgetown County claims it is next in the rotation because Horry has had two commissioners since the last time a Georgetown resident was on the board, but Horry lawmakers are sticking to their promise to elect businessman Danny Isaac to the post.

CCU board

The fallout from some legislators' attempt to persuade the governor to replace a board member continued at the end of the week.

Rankin and Elliott wrote Sanford saying they objected to his statement that he at first agreed to replace the board member because the entire Horry delegation asked him to.

Rankin and Elliott's letter said they did not participate in that request and have not attempted to involve themselves in the CCU board's choice of a president.

Rep. Alan Clemmons, R-Myrtle Beach, said most of the delegation wanted the board to pick Eddie Dyer over David DeCenzo because they know Dyer and have faith in his vision for the university.

Sanford decided against replacing the board member, Sam Frink, at this time.

On Saturday, the board gave the president's job to DeCenzo and created a new position, executive vice president, for Dyer. Both men accepted the jobs.

This week

A House committee on Tuesday continues review of bills on coastal insurance.

Separate Senate panels continue discussions of how to distribute tax money to schools.

Committees will continue to meet on the DOT issue.

On Wednesday a House panel will consider bills aimed at illegal immigrants, including several filed by Viers.

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