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WEEK IN THE LEGISLATURE Lawmakers promise reforms, cuts

By Zane Wilson - The Sun News

COLUMBIA --Lawmakers aren't going home unless they pass Department of Transportation reform, workers' compensation reform, income tax cuts and grocery tax cuts, House Republican leaders said Friday.

Agreement on those measures is stalling the \$7.3 billion state budget that includes millions of dollars for projects in Horry County and for Interstate 73 and Coastal Carolina University.

The session is supposed to end June 7, but Speaker of the House Bobby Harrell and others said they will stay all summer if they must.

They did not mention that they cannot stay in session later than midnight June 30 unless the governor calls them into special session, however. That is, unless they will attend without their pay.

"House Republicans are prepared to work all summer if that's what it takes," said Rep. Jim Merrill, R-Daniel Island and House majority leader, in a news release issued by the GOP leadership.

"The people of South Carolina did not re-elect a Republican majority last fall to approve budgets laden with pork and short on tax relief. I will not vote for anything resembling the Senate's budget. The additional \$250 million in the Senate budget must go toward our tax cuts, and there is simply no reason why it can't," Merrill said in the statement.

Harrell, R-Charleston, said House members also intend to stand fast for their version of the DOT and workers' compensation bills.

"Our conferees will take a strong stand, will work to bulldog these important reforms through and will cut into the fat of this budget," Harrell said in the statement.

Conference committees composed of three members from the House and three from the Senate are expected to start work this week on the DOT and workers' comp bills.

The budget conference committee met briefly two times last week and settled a few items, but not the big issues. They are scheduled to meet at 2:30 p.m. Tuesday.

Rep. Dan Cooper, R-Piedmont, said last week that if the budget is not agreed to by Thursday, legislators will not be able to finish June 7 because of the amount of time it takes to send it to the governor for review.

River shacks

The river shack bill became law Thursday without the governor's signature.

Gov. Mark Sanford did not say why he chose not to sign it.

The law allows state officials to remove or destroy river shacks.

Hundreds of them are in the state's rivers, lakes and sounds without permission, sometimes interfering with public access and dumping raw sewage and other waste into the water.

The law allows existing ones to stay for five years if they get a \$50 permit and have a marine toilet with a holding tank.

Precincts

The House passed a bill adding four voting precincts in Horry County, and it was sent to the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Lawmakers have had to add precincts almost every year because of growth.

The bill, sponsored by Rep. Tracy Edge, R-North Myrtle Beach, adds one precinct at Carolina Forest, two at Emerald Forest and one at Windy Hill, with locations to be determined by the Horry County Registration and Election Commission.

Horseplay

A couple of local legislators weren't quite through with the discussion from the previous week about recognition of a special horse, and whether the mule should receive the same recognition.

During discussion Thursday of a proposal to require horse riding and hiking in heritage preserves, Rep. Nelson Hardwick, R-Surfside Beach, said they need to make sure that mules are also allowed.

"Is that a hybrid vehicle?" asked Rep. Billy Witherspoon, R-Conway.

"I believe it is," Hardwick said.

This week

The spotlights will be on the DOT, workers' compensation and budget bills.

The Senate gave priority to floor debate on open enrollment for public schools and a cigarette tax increase with money going to health care and a grocery tax cut.

The coastal insurance legislation passed by the House is up for debate in the Senate after a few amendments by a Senate committee. The bill offers tax credits to companies for offering new full coverage, and to homeowners for strengthening their houses.

At 10 a.m. Wednesday, the Senate Education Committee will hear from State Superintendent Jim Rex on proposals to change the school accountability and assessment tests.

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