



Friday, April 18, 2008

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Part Time / No Term Limits?

“Centerpiece”

One of the efforts underway for the fall ballot is headed by the President and CEO of the Kalamazoo Chamber of Commerce, who is making it his mission to eliminate term limits, chop legislative salaries and make Michigan the 40th state with a part-time Legislature.

The man in charge, Steward Sandstrom, is confident that his efforts will be rewarded this fall. So far he’s collected more than 1,400 volunteers, has distributed a minimum of 8,000 petitions and convinced the Saginaw and Clarkston Chambers to join his group.

“We’re working with other chambers, the Kalamazoo Homebuilders were the first to come on board, and we’re working with other locals and state groups,” he said.

If Sandstrom is successful in his pursuit of a vastly reformed legislative schedule, the Legislature would have about six more weeks this year to get its work done. The Sandstrom effort would set a session day cap of 100 and require the Legislature to be gone by May 31 of each year.

“I would anticipate they are going to have committee meetings and hearings other times of the year,” Sandstrom says.

The Legislature currently has an average of 97 session days. Sandstrom said the 100-day cap gives them plenty of time to “discuss the important issues of the day.”

The Kalamazoo Chamber’s reforms go well beyond session days. They also tie lawmakers’ salaries to 80 percent of the state’s median household income, which is \$39,000, a vast dip from the \$79,000 they make today.

Anyone who doesn’t show up for session would have their pay docked. As for term limits, well, they’d be eliminated completely.

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Sandstrom said he's hopeful that once the proposal is on the ballot, the issue itself will entice people to vote in the affirmative. However, he still wants to get numbers that support his assumption that most people would be in favor of such a proposal.

His proposal is just one of two efforts to change the way the Legislature operates. The other effort being pushed by a Saginaw-based father-son combo does not repeal term limits.

Sandstrom's had conversations with Greg and Al Schmid but was unable to get them to merge efforts.

"They really like (term limits) the way they are. We don't think that that's the best way to govern the state," he said. "In fact, if the part-time Legislature goes through without a change in term limits we think that's catastrophic."

GCSEye On The Capitol

Energy Bills Pass House Handily

On a 78-30 vote, the House passed the energy package that would give the incumbent utilities, Detroit Edison (DTE) and Consumers Energy (CMS), the ability to move into the future with greater assurance of affordable, available power for Michigan citizens and businesses.

The package provides for a portion of the market to remain in "choice" and a certificate of need process for new power plants, introduces an energy efficiency program, creates a Renewable Portfolio Standard and adds a tax credit component to lure more semiconductor investments to the Hemlock facility.

The Michigan Chamber of Commerce and the Michigan Manufacturer's Association both ended up supporting the bills. It remains to be seen if the Senate will follow suit. The Senate has already passed one version of renewable energy standards.

Allen Puts Blues Substitutes on Deck

Sen. Jason Allen (R-Traverse City) surprised Senate Health Policy Committee Chair Sen. Tom George (R-Kalamazoo) with a new version of the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan bills this week.

During committee, Sen. Hansen Clarke (D-Detroit) asked for an immediate vote on the Allen sub, which would create a high-risk pool covered by BCBSM to cover the cost of insuring people with serious health conditions. Allen's sub also requires the insurance giant to file an annual report on its social mission spending, requires accountability reports on the individual market and the creation of a Guaranteed Access Pool (GAP) in three years.

After a brief discussion with committee members, Clarke agreed to wait until April 23 to discuss the bills. George was under the impression that Allen was simply going to introduce amendments, not a substitute. He added that consumer groups haven't had a chance to testify on the bills.

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Senate Says 'No Thanks' To Ross

As expected, the Senate let Gov. Jennifer Graholt's appointment of Ken Ross as the state's top insurance regulator go into effect without its approval.

Sen. Alan Sanborn (R-Richmond) laid into Ross after it was discovered that Office of Financial and Insurance Regulation (OFIR) Licensing Director Sonya Dungey remained at her post after registering convicted felons in direct violation of a 2004 OFIR Commissioner ruling.

Sanborn argued that he would have handled it differently.

Ross defended himself by saying the OFIR Commissioner operates under a civil service system that requires any employee discipline to be backed up by supportable facts. He said in this case, those did not exist.

Michigan Factoid

The "World's Largest Tire" is located in Allen Park. The 8-story tire that weighs 12 tons is located alongside Interstate 94 near the Southfield Freeway. It was a Ferris wheel at the 1964 World's Fair.

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