



Friday, June 12, 2009

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Centerpiece

This week, GCSIntel sat down with Rep. Lee Gonzales (D-Flint). In his third and final term, Gonzales has been an active player in the current debate over banning smoking in all work places. He's also the chair of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation.

Q. Have you gotten any indication at all the Senate would be willing to accept smoking ban legislation with an exemption for casinos?

A. Well, [Rep.] Bert Johnson (D-Detroit) has been working with them over there hoping that we can come to some middle ground certainly, and so far, it's still on pause.

I would say that with all the health associations that are trying to get this done, that they would really like to see something done and now would support my particular bill that is a compromise position.

Q. Why is it important to you to have a carve-out for casinos, cigar bars and tobacco shops?

A. We need something now, but unfortunately for the Detroit region and that area of the state it's about jobs. If we didn't have the provisions for the casinos down there, they could lose a lot of jobs.

Q. I want to move on to transportation issues . . . if we don't do some kind of revision of our road funding this year, do you think it's possible next year?

A. Well, number one, I don't even want that thought about next year. We need to do it now, and I'm really hoping that we can increase the funding pie. Literally, consumers are utilizing less gasoline; the projections are for less diesel to be used as well. So we're losing dollars.

We need to have enough dollars to match for the years 2011, 2012 and 2013 so we don't miss out on some of our federal dollars. For those years, we lack anywhere from \$250 million to \$380 million to leverage literally the \$1.8 billion -- and that's just for our state roads. That means our local roads in our counties, towns and so on, are really in tough shape.

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William Zaagman
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Q. I know there is an education process that has to go on for this chamber and the public as well with regard to the road-funding package. How long do you think it will be before the public is on board with this?

A. I was talking to a gentleman that runs a service station over in the Flint area. He had a lady that hit a pothole the other day, she lost two rims and she lost two tires on a smaller vehicle, and it cost her \$400 in repairs.

So, with that said, we have to take a look at --- it's like that commercial --- pay me now or pay me later. I think you do the pay me now because I think it's a lot cheaper than if you have to replace a strut on a car, some other front-end part on a vehicle.

And, it's a safety issue if these cars are hitting these holes and other problems on these roads that can cause a horrific traffic accident, so I think we need to do something.

Q. The last issue I wanted to ask you about was the trans-fat issues, we seem to be seeing a lot more about that, advertising on trans-fat content -- is that an issue you're still pursuing?

A. Yes. It's something we kind of put on the backburner because we didn't get a lot of buy in from the multiple stakeholders. But, trans-fats are not digestible and cause a lot of our type 2 diabetes. We did do the farm-to-school legislation which gets kids to eat fresher foods, fruits and vegetables produced by farmers in the communities across the state, and that was kind of neat thing to start out with.

I wish we could revisit it because I think it's something we need to look at. The obesity crisis in America is growing. Two-thirds [of citizens] are obese presently, and it's expected to grow to 75 percent by the year 2015.

GCSEye On The Capitol

Budget Director: Odds Leaning To Amicable Budget Resolution

State Budget Director Bob Emerson said this week there's a 50-50 chance that the state's Fiscal Year 2010 budget will be completed by September in light of recent progress. What he added was that "the odds are better there won't be a shutdown" as there was for four hours in 2007.

Emerson told reporters outside the Senate chambers Wednesday morning, "I don't think anybody wants to relive that."

"The task is daunting," he said, but he sees none of the "rancor" that surrounded the budget cycle that lead the protracted stalemate of two years ago.

"With the Governor out there with a tax increase" that may "slow things down," but overall "We have a better chance of getting it done early."

Autism Insurance Coverage Mandate Moves

The House Health Policy Committee on Tuesday unanimously moved legislation that would require health maintenance organizations, commercial insurers and Blue Cross Blue Shield to cover autism spectrum disorder (ASD) just as they would cover the treatment of other disorders.

Opponents of the legislation, including Amy Zaagman, associate director of the Michigan Association of Community Health Boards, argue the legislation aimed at ending discrimination against kids with autism does a bit of its own discriminating.

"The mental health and developmental disability communities come here hurt, wondering why you would move autism-only bills," she told the panel. "Comprehensive bills have been done in other states, and if we work together, we believe we can do both (provide mental health parity and autism treatments)."

The legislation specifies that treatment could not be limited or denied that is "habilitative in nature." Insurers also could not limit the number of visits. "Autism spectrum disorder" would mean a neurological condition that includes autism, Asperger syndrome, and Rett's syndrome.

GOP Candidate Contends Government Experience Not Necessary

Rick Snyder, a businessman from Ann Arbor who is seeking the GOP Republican gubernatorial nomination in 2010, said this week that government experience isn't needed to serve as governor.

While some critics of the Republican newcomer may argue it is presumptuous for him to explore running for the 2010 gubernatorial nomination without ever having held elective office, Snyder said, "I think that's a good thing . . . We need a new breath of fresh air."

Asked if a person needs to have some political experience to run state government, Snyder said, "I don't think so."

The former Gateway executive said he believes he has gained the right kind of experience in the private sector/business world to be governor.

"I've successfully organized a multi-billion dollar company," he recounted.

Michigan Factoid:

The western shore of Michigan has many sand dunes. The Sleeping Bear Dunes rise 460 feet above Lake Michigan. Living among the dunes is the dwarf lake iris, the official state wildflower.

The Week Ahead

The House Labor Committee on Wednesday will take up legislation sponsored by Rep. Mark Meadows (D-East Lansing) to establish a right for employees to pursue employment free from religious or political indoctrination and to limit employment actions based on attending or receptivity to employer-selected political or religious programs or communications.

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