Legislature Faces Deadlines

March 3, 2009

The recently revised revenue forecast insures that the budget will remain the dominant issue of the 2009 legislative session. An anticipated budget shortfall of over $8 billion is forcing legislators to check the fiscal impact of all legislation. Cutting costs, and sometimes whole programs, is the rule.

February 24th was Catholic Advocacy Day, which saw over 200 advocates meeting with their legislators, and urging them to preserve the safety net programs such as General Assistance Unemployable (GAU), the Basic Health Plan, and the Housing Trust Fund for Washington's poorest citizens.

February 25th was the cut-off date for bills to be voted out of their respective policy committees, and March 2nd was the date by which all bills with a fiscal impact had to be voted out of the Ways and Means Committees. Legislation not out of these committees is considered "dead" for this session, though resurrection is always possible. This is usually accomplished by attaching it as an amendment to another bill that has passed.

The process has whittled the thousands of bills introduced during the 2009 session down to just over a 1,000. One of the casualties of the cut-off was SB 5476, which would have abolished the death penalty in Washington State. The Washington State Catholic Conference (WSCC) testified in favor of the bill, and worked to keep the bill alive, but fell one vote short of moving it out of the Senate Judiciary Committee. The House version (HB 1909) never had a hearing.

The House Ways and Means Committee members worked late into "cutoff" night to hear multiple bills, including 2SHB 1727. This bill would expand the legal rights accorded to same-sex couples in Washington State, making them the same as those granted to married couples. WSCC testified against the bill, but the measure passed (14-8), and now moves on to the Rules Committee, as has its sister bill in the Senate, 2SSB 5688. Proponents of the bill have made it clear that this measure is a pathway to legalizing same-sex marriage in Washington State.

Bills (2SHB 1747, 2SSB 5854) that would reduce the greenhouse gas emissions generated by buildings in Washington State by 70% by the year 2031 have also passed the House Ways and Means Committees and are in their respective Rules Committees. WSCC supports these bills.

The next "cutoff" for the Legislature is March 12th, when all bills must be voted out of their house of origin; that is, House bills must be out of the House and Senate bills must pass the Senate. Between now and then legislators will spend each day, almost all day, discussing, debating and passing bills that have a majority vote.

Note: When a bill is amended in a committee, an "S" is added to the bill's designation to note that the bill has been amended [changed] (e.g. SSB 5678, SHB 1234). A "2" before this "S" means the bill has been amended twice.