

General Assembly kicks off this week

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

The General Assembly kicked off its 2011 session Wednesday, Jan. 12, and lawmakers who serve northeastern and eastern Colorado recently talked about their priorities for the next legislative term.

Now in his third term, Rep. Jerry Sonnenberg, R-Sterling, of HD 65 has been tapped to play several leadership roles in the 2011 session. Sonnenberg is the new chair of the House Agriculture, Livestock and Natural Resources Committee.

He's also chairing the Capital Development Committee, a joint committee of the House and Senate, which reviews and authorizes state building projects, although the state's current budget situation means that committee is a lot less busy these days.

It's unusual for a legislator to chair two committees, but Sonnenberg said last week he had options regarding a leadership position. "I had to contemplate on whether to get into leadership or be chair of ag," but said he thought it would more important to be chair of ag.

Sonnenberg's number one priority bill this session is to repeal HB 10-1195, which repealed tax exemptions for agricultural compounds, pesticides and bull semen. The bill was part of a package of repeals on tax exemptions and tax credits designed to help close the state's 2009-10 and 2010-11 budget gaps.

HB 1195 was a temporary time-out of the exemption, due to expire on June 30, 2013 and was estimated in its final fiscal analysis to bring in about \$4.6 million per year into state coffers.

Sonnenberg is hopeful he'll be able to get the bill targeting those exemptions to Gov. John Hickenlooper's desk. He hasn't yet talked about his bill to his counterpart on the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee, Sen. Gail Schwartz, D-Snowmass Village, but Schwartz was one of the three Democratic "no" votes on HB 1195 last February.

Sonnenberg believes if he can get the support of the governor's office on the bill, the Senate

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“will fall in line.” Sonnenberg is hopeful about the new governor, noting he’s had more discussions with the new governor’s office prior to Hickenlooper being sworn in than he had with Ritter in the four years he was in office.

Sonnenberg also plans to carry a sunset review bill that applies to Conservation District Grant Fund in water conservation districts, another that would ensure the Department of Agriculture’s “premise ID” database is secure; and a bill to take state employees at the Northeastern Junior College golf course and restaurant out of the state personnel system.

Last week, Hickenlooper named former U.S. Rep. John Salazar, a sixth-generation farmer and rancher from Manassa, in the San Luis Valley, as ag commissioner. Hickenlooper also asked Mike King, current executive director of DNR, to stay on.

Sonnenberg said the choice of Salazar is “interesting. John Stulp (who will remain on as a policy advisor) was a wonderful ag commissioner. I always worry about public perception when we appoint somebody to a political position who just got fired from another job,” which he said hints at a “good old boys” network.

He is more hopeful about King, who Ritter appointed to the position last spring and who inherited the controversy over oil and gas regulation changes. “I’m hoping to have discussions with (King) on creating a good working environment between DNR and landowners,” Sonnenberg said.

“He understands the issues of the past, and I’m optimistic there will be changes (in the oil and gas regulations).” Sonnenberg noted the new governor also has promised to work with the oil and gas industry on these issues.

“I’m not more powerful,” he said with a smile. “I’m just more conducive to being able to lead.”

Sen. Greg Brophy, R-Yuma, of Senate District 1, was a bit more positive about Salazar’s appointment. “John Salazar is a proven friend to agriculture,” which Brophy said was demonstrated when he voted against a cap-and-trade bill in Congress.

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He called Salazar “a bit of a socialist on health care,” but said Salazar was a “darn good pick for ag—we got the socialist out of (Congress) and the farmer back to help us on ag.” Brophy called King a “pretty thoughtful guy” who gives him hope.

Brophy said he wished the election results in November had turned out differently at the governor’s level, in order to encourage oil and gas activity. “If we want communities to grow, it has to be in energy,” he said. “We have to work very thoughtfully, reach out and convince people who might not agree with us” on maximizing drilling and changing the regulations from one-size-fits-all to something more appropriate for each region of the state.

Brophy said he believes Hickenlooper understands the economic perils of “purposely turning off” one of the most important industries in the state and will be more friendly to changes.

Brophy’s top legislative priority for 2011 is to “first do no harm—balance the budget without giving eastern Colorado the short shrift.”

He does have five bills in mind, although he said two of them may not get introduced until late in the session, if at all. One deals with how to cut through red tape for school districts with declining enrollments, an issue that applies to at least a half-dozen schools in his district.

His biggest priority item is a check-off program for natural gas similar to the one that already exists for beef and corn. Brophy explained it would be a voluntary payment, at the first point of sale of product, into an account run by industry producers, who then use the money to promote the product, similar to the “it’s what’s for dinner” campaign for the beef industry.

As to what to promote, he wants to encourage more use of compressed natural gas for transportation, especially trucking. Brophy said there are a number of hurdles to overcome on this and that’s why it may not get onto the Legislature’s calendar this session.

One bill definitely up this session deals with an issue closer to home (actually, right at

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home)—allowing children to keep life-saving medication on their person. Brophy explained state law requires a child who needs medication at school to get a doctor's prescription, a form signed by a school nurse, another sign-off by the doctor and then a contract between the student, parents and school nurse on responsibility for the medication.

The medication is then locked up in the principal's office. And that process has to be repeated every year, Brophy said. It assumes kids abuse their life-saving medication, but Brophy said he believes kids in those situations are going to be a lot more careful about that medication.

Brophy's son, David, has asthma and needs an inhaler. Brophy said getting to that inhaler or other life-saving medication might not always be possible when the key is in the hands of someone who may be at lunch or when the student is in physical education classes at a field a quarter of a mile away. "Let's empower the school districts to deal with someone who might be a problem," Brophy said.

Brophy also is carrying a bill related to landowner and event planner liability for mountain bikes. While it's not critically important to his district, he said it's important to the state, and he's also got a bill on putting the state year-round on daylight savings time.

But what may take up much of Brophy's time this session is being on a joint redistricting commission announced last month by the legislative leadership. The 10-member commission will be responsible for coming up with citizen input and maps on Colorado's congressional boundaries.

Brophy said he hopes the commission will have a map ready for the General Assembly before the end of the session, a tight time line given that much of the census data that will be used for the maps won't be out until mid- to late February. The commission will begin its work this month with a series of meetings around the state to gather citizen input.

Brophy is committed to seeing the Legislature comes up with the map. "I want the legislature to draw the maps, not the courts," he said. "I want it done right, and when the inevitable court challenge comes, they will say the Legislature drew a fair and constitutional map. It will be exciting and very educational."

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