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Area legislators hear citizens' concerns

BY DAVID BEARD

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About 20 people braved Wednesday night's cold weather to converse with Monongalia County legislators about their plans for the legislative session that begins next week.

The League of Women Voters sponsored the forum at Suncrest United Methodist Church. Sen. Mike Oliverio and Delegates Bob Beach, Barbara Evans Fleischauer, Charlene Marshall and Alex Shook addressed the audience and fielded questions.

A relatively large chunk of time was devoted to the Dunkard Creek fish kill.

Fleischauer said that in the wake of the kill, there are plans to reintroduce a bill to limit total dissolved solids (TDS), including salt molecules, in state waters.

Discussions about the kill have focused largely on TDS in CONSOL mine pool discharges into the creek, and whether they caused the blooming of algae that killed the fish and mussels in the creek.

Resident Jim Kotcen noted that the House has made more progress on the problem than the Senate.

"How many dead fish do we need to dump on senators' desks?" he asked. And he want-

ed to know if the TDS problem stemmed from a lack of standards or the state Department of Environmental Protection's failure to enforce existing rules.

Resident Deborah Fulton criticized the DEP for granting CONSOL repeated extensions on discharges since 2002. Instead of doing its job of protecting waters, it's sanctioning pollution, she said.

Fleischauer said it has been a steep learning curve, and area legislators need to educate their colleagues about the problem.

Former Delegate Cindy Frich asked the panel how they plan to pay down the \$7.8 billion Other Post Employee Benefits deficit.

Shook replied, "I don't think anybody knows."

Oliverio noted that a Senate panel is looking at the issue for this session. And he pointed out the bad news — whether the money comes from the county level or the state level, it will ultimately come from the taxpayers.

Legislators briefly covered their interests for the session.

Oliverio said that despite revenue shortfalls and the mandated 3.4 percent budget cuts, West Virginia "is uniquely positioned for some of the best days the state has ever had."

Fleischauer added that West

Virginia is one of just two states not facing a deficit.

Concerned about Alzheimer's disease research, she said the state needs to provide more funding for the Blanchette Rockefeller Neurosciences Institute.

Marshall remarked that the Legislature will handle 700-plus carryover bills from the 2009 session. She is interested in reform of the state's foster care program and in creating a youth crisis intervention program, in racial profiling issues and in getting funds for the West Virginia Women Work!

Shook said he is interested in the state's judicial reform efforts — particularly looking to end partisan election of judges. A trial lawyer, he personally favors some kind of appointment system.

He also has his eye on prison overcrowding. Among the methods to address this, he said, are alternative sentences and drug courts.

Beach said a school calendar bill is in the works that will allow the county school systems more flexibility in responding to snow days, so they can meet their 180-day mandate.

The Legislature is also revising its sex offender registry law, and he wants to include a provision requiring convicts to supply all e-mail accounts.