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Bills move on Day 50

Delegates OK hike in state trooper levels

BY DAVID BEARD The Dominion Post

A LOOK at recently moved legislation, Page 2-A.

CHARLESTON — On landmark Day 50, the House of Delegates passed bills to protect water quality in gas drilling operations, boost the number of state troopers to 800 and publicly fund supreme court elections.

Day 50 — Wednesday — was the final day for the House or Senate to pass a bill on third reading and send it to the other chamber. The House had more than 40 bills on its plate, the Senate more than 50.

The heavily debated West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals Public Campaign Financing Pilot Program, a committee substitute for HB 4130, passed, 67-30, with three members absent.

The bill creates a public fund to finance campaigns, and raises a number of court fees and costs to generate money. It also draws \$3 million from a state auditor's fund, in three \$1 million payments over three years.

During a contested primary campaign, a candidate may receive \$200,000 from the fund, minus any qualifying, required private contributions ranging from \$35,000 to \$50,000. The subsidy goes to \$350,000 for the general election. Candidates may obtain more funds if an opponent who is not using public funds raises more than 20 percent more money from private sources.

Delegate Bill Wooten, DRaleigh, opposed the bill. Legislators, he said, avoid raising taxes by raising fees; but fees are taxes, nonetheless, and it's morally wrong to tax people going through divorce and other proceedings to pay for judicial elections.

And the bill is overfunded, he said. North Carolina, with five times as many people, caps spending in a judicial election at \$1.4 million. West Virginia estimates it will spend from \$3.4 million to \$8.9 million on its 2012 election under the pilot program.

Delegate Patrick Lane, R-Kanawha, supported it. People perceive that money drives state politics and influences decisions, he said. "Money in politics is bad. Money in the judiciary is abhorrent to justice." It can appear improper, and can really buy influence, he said.

If the bill becomes law, the pilot program will expire in 2013, following the 2012 Supreme Court election.

State troopers

and water quality

The committee substitute for HB 4397 simply says the state police superintendent "shall develop a program to enable the state to attain a minimum number of eight hundred troopers by July 1, 2014."

The fiscal note says this will call for an additional class of 31 cadets for the next four years, with an estimated first-year cost of \$3.27 million.

Among the sponsors are Delegates Mike Caputo, DMarion and Dave Pethtel, DWetzel. It passed unanimously. The bill will go to the Senate, where its similar version, SB 386, is in the Finance Committee.

The water quality bill, a Com Sub for HB 4513, passed 89-8, all the opponents being Republicans. It mandates new requirements for Marcellus Shale gas well operations to allow the state to track the use of water and the waste fluids produced by drilling.

The bill is sponsored by Tim Manchin, Mike Caputo and Linda Longstreth, all DMarion; Bob Beach and Barbara Evans Fleischauer, and Charlene Marshall, all D-Monongalia; Mike Manypenny, D-Taylor; and three others.

“It took a lot of education on this side,” Fleischauer said, noting proponents will work to inform their Senate colleagues of its importance.

“It’s a water quality issue, and this bill is the minimum of information we need to have to make sure our water quality doesn’t go down. It’s a piece of the puzzle of trying to prevent another Dunkard Creek disaster.”

She credited Manchin for his work negotiating with members of the gas drilling industry to craft the bill.

