

Publication:The Dominion Post;**Date:**Dec 31, 2007;**Section:**Local;**Page Number:**13

Area legislators consider environment, TrAIL in '08

PEIA and veterans aid are also priorities for delegates next year

BY J. MILES LAYTON The Dominion Post

Area legislators have made environmental concerns, veterans' assistance and changes to the Public Employee Insurance Agency a big part of their legislative agenda for the new term, starting in January.

Water pollution and issues surrounding the siting of Allegheny Energy's proposed 500-kilovolt power line project are among legislators' top priorities.

Sen. Jon Blair Hunter, D-Monongalia, said he is prepared to fight the coal industry and farmer's lobby to keep streams from being polluted. He said the state's Department of Environmental Protection downgraded 309 streams so that only 156 are protected from pollution.

"We need to make sure we are not polluting streams that are currently not being polluted," he said.

Sen. Mike Oliverio, D-Monongalia, said the designation of streams will also be an important part of his legislative agenda.

Like many other area legislators, Hunter is opposed to the proposed Trans-Allegheny Interstate Line project. If approved by the state's Public Service Commission, the line would cross 114 miles through six counties in West Virginia.

If eminent domain is used, the ultimate value of the property taken will be determined by a jury. Based on the evidence presented to them, the jurors will decide the fair-market value of the property.

Hunter said he plans to introduce legislation that will allow for affected landowners to receive more money than fair market value.

"I want to make sure that people are fairly compensated," Hunter said. "Having one acre out of 100 taken for a power line still affects the value of all that land. That doesn't talk about the impact on all the property that is being taken. Surrounding landowners should also be compensated."

Delegate Alex Shook, D-Monongalia, who opposes the power line project, was unable to be reached for comment, but he has indicated that he would support and maybe even draft similar legislation.

Delegate Bob Beach, D-Monongalia, supports legislation to change the makeup of the board that governs the state's Public Service Commission. The PSC is responsible for making decisions about any power line projects that could be crossing the state, such as TrAIL.

"A lot of us would feel more comfortable if the PSC board was made up of more regional appointees versus political or more localized appointees because a lot of these people come from the Charleston area," he said. "Regionally appointed board members might be more sympathetic to regional issues such as TrAIL."

Among the items on Delegate Barbara Evans Fleischauer's, DMonongalia, wish list include a proposal to increase energy conservation standards for future state office buildings. Fleischauer seeks to reduce global warming by requiring utility companies to use larger percentages of renewable energy and requiring higher emissions control standards for automobiles.

Fleischauer will continue her support for a bottle bill that would add a 10-cent deposit fee to glass, aluminum and plastic drink containers in West Virginia. The retailers would send the deposit money to the state treasurer, who would use it to pay handling fees to redemption centers. Customers would be able to redeem their deposit

money from the redemption centers in exchange for empty containers.

Proponents of the legislation, which has been before the Legislature five times in as many years without passing, say it would reduce litter, create space in landfills and be good for consumers and businesses. But foes, including the state's private recyclers, soft drink distributors and beer distributors, say it would amount to the largest tax hike in years.

Another issue the Legislature will consider is whether or not drilling for oil and gas will be allowed in and around state parks.

"This will be one of the biggest environmental issues that will come up in this session," Oliverio said.

Fleischauer and Hunter want to introduce legislation to help veterans returning home after tours of duty in combat zones overseas. Fleischauer is co-chairwoman of a joint Senate-House committee that issued a statewide survey to get a handle on the needs of West Virginia's estimated 5,500 Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans.

Fleischauer said there have been improvements in medical care since the Vietnam era, but those military personnel who are injured in today's wars have more serious injuries.

Hunter, Senate co-chairman of the committee, said the committee has gathered information about the injuries suffered by veterans and the medical and emotional support they require, and about other factors that could help or hinder their transition to civilian life.

"As a veteran," said Hunter, also chair of the committee on military affairs, "I believe we need to do what we can for these veterans."

In the past several months, the state's Public Employee Insurance Agency has come under fire from retirees and doctors because the agency contracted out to a private company for some retiree insurance coverage. Retirees and doctors are unhappy with the new system, and some doctors are dropping patients whose health costs are covered by the private company.

"I want to reverse the PEIA move because retirees are really getting hammered with higher Medicare costs," Hunter said.

Beach favors a more cautious approach. "We have to proceed with caution before we make any changes to the system — consider all of our options," he said.

Oliverio is concerned about changes in PEIA for retirees.

"I want to spend some time this legislative session re-evaluating the program to make sure we are honoring our commitment to retirees," he said.

In a move designed to help retired state employees, Charlene Marshall, D-Monongalia, said she hopes to increase their pensions.

"I look forward to the day we will have when retirees can have their pensions increased," she said. "Whatever we could do for them would be good. I've heard from so many retirees, and it just really breaks your heart."

Hunter said he would support a proposal that would allow retired state employees to be exempt from state taxes.