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## Legislators mull '08 agenda

### Teacher raises, environment top list of priorities

**BY J. MILES LAYTON** The Dominion Post

SEE MONDAY'S The Dominion Post for legislators' thoughts on veterans, the environment and retirees' pension benefits.

Area legislators support pay increases for educators, environmental reforms and a grab bag of other initiatives during the next legislative term, starting in January.

Delegate Barbara Evans Fleischauer, D-Monongalia, will be seeking legislation that will improve the environment, protect consumers and help veterans who are returning home, and vows to support pay raises for educators. Fleischauer wants to protect consumers from the fine print on gift cards. She said some companies deduct money if gift cards are not used soon after they are purchased.

"There shouldn't be secret terms that you find out later," she said.

Delegate Charlene Marshall, D-Monongalia, wants to improve working conditions for school service personnel such as cooks, secretaries and bus drivers. She supports proposed legislation to shield employees from being forced to listen to an employer's religious or political message. Opponents of the measure say it limits employers' rights to free speech and encourages lawsuits.

"I will certainly continue to support this legislation," she said. "Anyone who has any sort of dealings like that in the workplace knows how important it is to have law in place that protects them."

Delegate Bob Beach, D-Monongalia, wants to make changes to the board membership of the state's Public Service Commission and plans to take a cautious approach regarding any changes to the Public Employees Insurance Agency funding for retirees' benefits.

Sen. Jon Blair Hunter, D-Monongalia, who is not running for re-election, plans to support teacher pay increases, help veterans who are returning home and to protect the water quality of the state's streams.

Sen. Mike Oliverio, D-Monongalia, wants further changes to the business tax structure. Last year, Senate Bill 749 included some comprehensive changes to the business tax structure.

"This session, some additional work will be done to implement these changes before they go into effect later in 2008," he said.

In addition to Oliverio's legislative agenda, he plans to spend time advocating the passage of the user fee. Under Monongalia County's proposal, anyone who draws a paycheck in the county will be charged a \$2-a-week service fee that will be used to finance about \$150 million in road-construction projects during the next 30 years.

"I am going to use the bully pulpit of my position as a state senator to support the user fee's passage on the ballot on Feb. 2," he said. "Passing this is important because our county needs a 21st century transportation system. We can't get there without passage of this."

Delegate Alex Shook, D-Monongalia, could not be reached for comment. Recently, Shook indicated he favors a pay increase for teachers and state employees, and supports legislation to shield employees from being forced to listen to an employer's religious or political message.

Shook opposes the Trans-Allegheny Interstate Line project and said he would support legislation to allow affected landowners to get more money for property that is taken for the proposed power line project.

#### Education

Area legislators support a salary increase for teachers and state employees.

The West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission wants close to \$17 million for a 3.4 percent increase in faculty and staff salaries at state colleges and universities, as part of \$65 million in added funding it is requesting in the upcoming legislative session.

The West Virginia Educators Association wants to increase West Virginia teacher salaries in three years to an average \$49,000, equal to the national average, according to the union's Web site. The proposal also includes raising starting teacher salaries more than \$6,000, to \$35,000 a year. WVEA President Charlie Delauder says those increases would cost the state an additional \$50 million a year.

As long as a pay increase doesn't break the budget, Fleischauer wants to increase salaries for teachers and WVU faculty and staff.

"If we want to improve our education system, we want to make sure our educators are paid well," she said. "We have to be very responsible because of the balanced budget requirement. Our strong wish and hope is to increase teachers' salaries and increase budget for WVU."

Marshall has made the same pledge to increase salaries.

"I will be supportive of teacher pay raises and any improvements for schools and education," she said.

Teachers' salaries have fallen from 47th to 48th in average salaries, according to the WVEA Web site. The salary rankings are compiled by NEA Research and reflect the 2006-2007 school year.

Referring to this data, Beach said he supports a pay increase, but only if it won't break the budget. Like many other legislators, Beach is waiting to see what Gov. Joe Manchin will be proposing at the State of the State address in January.

"Most of us are waiting for what the governor will present to us, but overall I am in favor of increasing salaries. I respect what teachers are trying to accomplish considering our rankings. There will be a lot of bartering before it is done. I'm sure clear heads will prevail," Beach said.

Hunter said he will continue to support a pay increase for teachers and WVU employees.

"We should continue to try and make the salaries for teachers and service personnel as competitive as we can," he said.

Hunter said that because of the shrinking budget, there have been a lot of cuts to staff in higher education. "A lot of people are overworked in my opinion," he said.

"We need to do something with higher education to make sure they are more fully funded."

Oliverio said he is confident the Legislature will pass a pay increase.

"We will be able to achieve a 3 percent teacher pay raise package with this legislation that will include filling in the steps of the salary schedule," he said.

Last year, the WVEA lobbied for a 6 percent increase for teachers and school employees. After only getting a 3.5 percent pay raise, the WVEA announced any of its 17,000 members could participate in a oneday walkout in March. More than four dozen Monongalia County teachers and staff missed work on the day of the "sick-out."