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Schedule for interims is jam-packed

44 meetings set for the three-day session

BY DAVID BEARD The Dominion Post

The West Virginia Legislature returns to Charleston on Monday for the next set of interim meetings. What are the interims all about? In a nutshell, they are committee meetings that can be humdrum or fiery.

And when interest groups are passionate about a potential bill, they'll pack those wood-paneled meeting rooms to breathing-roomonly capacity.

The schedule itself is jam-packed for the three-day session. There are 44 meetings set for Monday through Wednesday.

This week, a Finance subcommittee on Monday will talk about the Other Post Employee Benefits program — which is facing a \$7 billion unfunded liability.

An Education subcommittee will hear views on the year-round school issue Tuesday.

The Select Committee on Children, Juveniles and other Issues will hear about foster care issues Wednesday.

Legislative educational materi- al explains that about once a month during the period between regular sessions — the interim — the Legislature gathers in Charleston or another location in the state for three days of committee meetings.

This month, they run Monday through Wednesday.

What committees do

The Interim Committees usually are joint committees, the legislative material says, with members of the Senate and House of Delegates working together as single groups.

There are 33 committees, and four of those — Education, Finance, Government Organization and Judiciary — each have three subcommittees.

The interim committees provide a forum for the continuing study of issues relevant to the future of the state, generally with possible legislation in mind. The marching orders for the study topic come in the form of a resolution.

For example, proponents and opponents of a proposed constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage packed the Senate Judiciary Chamber during the July interims. The joint House-Senate Judiciary Subcommittee A was gathering public comment.

The educational material notes that some bills previously rejected by the Legislature need some finetuning. The interims allow time for reconsideration, reworking and possible reintroduction at the next regular session.

The interim meetings also allow the Legislature to monitor the effects of current legislation. For instance, a group of WVU graduate students presented papers to a Government Organization subcommittee in August recommending changes to the West Virginia Public Employees Grievance Board procedures, which were revamped in 2007 and are being reviewed.

Along with joint standing committees, there are two other types of interim committees: oversight and investigative. Oversight committees oversee the general operations of certain state agencies. Investigative committees are formed during the regular session and study specific issues.

Special sessions

In August, Gov. Joe Manchin called a special session that ran concurrently with interims. While they occur during the same time span, they aren't the same thing.

The special session concerned a one-time, \$500 per person pay "enhancement" for state employees. The governor wanted the Legislature to pass a bill authorizing the enhancement.

So while interim committees were meeting, the regular House and Senate finance committees were also meeting to hash over the governor's proposal.

On the House side, some Finance members either came late to meetings or left early to juggle their interim commitments. Some interim committees canceled meetings because of the special session business.

What legislators think

The Legislature has 44 meetings set for Monday through Wednesday.

For Delegate Barbara Evans Fleischauer, D-Monongalia, interims are a time to learn, to think, to plan solutions.

When an issue arises, "you can't just throw a bill out there," she said.

For instance, she sits on a Judiciary Subcommittee that heard from parents and educators about the need for health insurance for children with autism. Some companies don't cover certain conditions if the patient has autism.

While the issue has been before the Legislature for several years, she's not yet sure what the best solution is. The interim meeting gave her the information to begin working toward an answer — and a possible bill.

Sen. Roman Prezioso, D-Marion, agreed interims are an important process in determining which legislation will emerge in January.

Interims offer a chance to hear from state agencies and the public, to ask questions.

There's not much politicking going on, he said — it's "mostly nuts and bolts stuff."

One of the committees he sits on has just six meetings to handle six resolutions — so they're assigning work to subcommittees. "There's not enough time three days a month to handle all the issues."

He's chair of several interim committees, including the Select Committee on Health. In December, he said, the staff will prepare synopses of all the issues they've handled, and the committee will review each issue and take motions for draft legislation to present during the January interims.

"It's a very intense situation," he said, "but helpful, too."

Interims are also set for Oct. 13-15, Nov. 17-19, Dec. 7-9 and Jan. 10-12. The 2010 regular session begins Jan. 13.

