

WVU grad student helped write bills

BY DAVID BEARD

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CHARLESTON — A WVU student working as an intern in the House of Delegates played a role in the development of two bills that directly affect Morgantown.

The student is Erica Rogers, 24, a second-year master's student in public administration. She is working as an intern for the House Judiciary Committee through a one-year Lewis McManus Fellowship for public administration graduate students.

The bills are SB 335, which enables the city of Morgantown to regulate taxi service, and HB 3202, known as the landlord bill and the security deposit bill.

Local Sens. Bob Beach, D-Monongalia, and Roman Prezioso, D-Marion, sponsored the taxi bill. As it came from the Senate, it allowed any Class I or II city to regulate certain aspects of taxi service: Taxi conditions and inspections, taxi stand locations, drug testing and the posting of signs with numbers to call to complain.

When it came to the House, Rogers worked with Delegate Barbara Evans Fleischauer, D-Monongalia, to limit it to any Class I or II city with a land grant university of 20,000 or more students — namely Morgantown.

The House passed it Saturday morning 88-10, with all local delegates support-

ing it, and sent it to the Senate for approval of its amendment. The Legislature was scheduled to end its 60-day session at midnight Saturday; by mid-afternoon the Senate hadn't taken action on the bill.

Rogers has been at WVU six years, served on the Student Government Association (SGA), and said she knows Morgantown taxi service well. There are positives, she said. "Quite frankly, anytime I've gotten into one I've always ended up at the place I was trying to go," Rogers said. "That's good I suppose, since that's the purpose of a taxi."

But she, and many other students, she said, constantly worry about their safety, the conditions of the taxis — "It kind of feels like Fred Flintstone with his feet running out of the bottom of the taxicab" — and the spotty availability of a ride. "It's like trying to find a magical unicorn in Morgantown."

As an intern, Rogers' job is to research and analyze bills. When the taxi bill came to the Judiciary Committee, she was allowed to work with Fleischauer on amending it.

There was concern that the bill was too broad, she said. Different cities have different taxi issues.

Jeb Corey, CEO of C&H Taxi in Charleston, representing the West Virginia Taxi Association, had expressed

some reservations about it.

Fleischauer and Rogers crafted the language, lifted from another taxi bill that died, to limit the bill to Morgantown. That version cleared the Judiciary Committee and succeeded in the House.

The landlord bill is even dearer to Rogers' heart. Legislation setting deadlines for landlords to return security deposits began back in 2004-'05. An SGA colleague worked on it in 2009 to no avail.

When Rogers arrived for her internship, she decided to pick it up. Other WVU students also worked on it and pushed to get it passed.

"This is important to me," she said. West Virginia is one of a small handful of states that don't set a statutory timeline for landlords to return security deposits, she said. "We're kind of behind in that. This is something that we've needed for a long time."

She dug out old bills and used them to craft this one. Landlords had issues with the bill, and she assisted the Senate Judiciary Committee in drafting changes to ease some of their worries.

Rogers and her WVU friends were surprised Thursday when the Senate suspended its rules and passed the bill a day earlier than they expected. Asked about the bill's passage, she said, "I'm ecstatic."

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on the Senate amendment.

Some remarks from the opposition

Not everyone is pleased with the bills.

Morgantown Cab owner Bobby King said he didn't like the taxi bill.

"I don't think it's a good thing," he said. The company already adheres to most of the bill's components, King said. For example, its vehicles are inspected by two agencies every year — once by the Public Service Commission and once by a state-authorized vehicle inspector. Regular vehicles just have one state inspection.

King said he does background checks on driver applicants. If someone makes a complaint against the company, he handles it personally.

Some landlords have supported the security deposit bill.

But Rick Biafora said that he doesn't think the bill is fair for both sides. He oversees Metro Property Management, the largest landlord in the area.

He said landlords need at least 60 days, if not more, after a lease ends to return the deposit so they can make repairs, make the deductions and get checks sent out. It is going to be "tough" to get to get the deposits back in 60 days, Biafora said.