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Local lawmakers active as legislation session begins

By RICK YENCER
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STORYCHAT: 1 Comment

INDIANAPOLIS -- East Central Indiana lawmakers set out a big agenda Monday, praying in the House, pledging compromise between Republicans and Democrats and promising to protect taxpayers in the next biennial budget.

"I think it will be great if both sides can set down and reach agreement," said Rep. Dennis Tyler, D-Muncie, a member of the House Ways and Means Committee.

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Rep. Bill Davis, R-Portland, agreed, saying everyone was concerned with the next state budget, which is now at \$26 billion and could grow by \$1.5 billion to include full-day kindergarten, affordable health care for the poor and more funding for public schools and higher education.

"People are sick to death of taxes," Davis said. "We have to protect property taxpayers."

The House began with an official prayer that apparently complied with a federal judge's ruling prohibiting sectarian preference. The Senate held a moment of silence.

New Sen. Sue Errington, D-Muncie, began her day with a reception by the Indiana Department of Education, where she and other lawmakers were assured the next state budget had money available for full-day kindergarten.

"We are working on a different version of full-day kindergarten," Errington said about a proposal by Senate Democrats to expand on Republican Gov. Mitch Daniels's plan to begin with the poorest of

students.

Errington also will have her name on another high profile bill authored by Sen. Tim Lanane, D-Anderson, to raise the state minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$7.25 over the next two years.

"(Errington) already has become very involved," Lanane said about the freshman lawmaker.

Senate Republicans promised some movement on property tax reform, as President Pro Tem David Long, R-Fort Wayne, told reporters that taxpayer protection would be the priority.

"The new leadership is off to a good start," Sen. Beverly Gard, R-Greenfield said, regarding Long succeeding longtime Senate leader Robert Garton.

Gard said the obvious priority was adopting the budget, which probably won't happen until the final day of the session. Plenty of debate also is expected by Gard on Daniels's toll road plans, including an expressway on the east and south sides of Indianapolis that would cut through her district.

"The commerce connector has more questions than answers," said Gard, who has not formed an opinion on the proposal.

Outside legislative chambers, there were plenty of special interests representing virtually everyone impacted by the state budget and legislation.

The Indiana Chamber of Commerce began meeting with lawmakers Monday to make its agenda known.

"We want to keep the state budget balanced," said Kevin Brinegar, chamber president.

How to contact your legislators

Indiana House

- **District 31** (Blackford, Grant counties)

Rep. Tim Harris, R-Marion

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- **District 34** (Delaware County)

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- **District 35** (Delaware, Hamilton, Madison and Tipton counties)

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- **District 27** (Jay, Randolph and Wayne counties)

Sen. Allen Paul, R-Richmond

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And state chamber officials also support full-day kindergarten for low-income students, and don't want to see property tax relief for homeowners result in higher taxes for business.

Brad Klopfenstein, executive director of Indiana Licensed Beverage Association, said the next state budget and most of Daniels's proposal depend on revenue, which will bring new gaming initiatives to the agenda.

"I have not seen that they want to cut anything," Klopfenstein said.

The Legislature will consider bills to legalize electronic gaming, slot machines and pull tabs, that could raise millions for the state budget. Tyler might sponsor a pull tab bill for local bars and restaurants.

And Klopfenstein sees other forms of gaming coming with the governor's plan to lease the lottery to a private firm that might want to add Keno and other games.

Phil Sachtleben, Ball State University's associate vice president of government relations, anticipated the projected 4-percent growth in state revenue would provide extra operating and capital funds to state universities.


Ball State is looking for \$30 million to renovate older buildings like the Teacher's College, west quad and the applied science and technology building, along with other increases in operating funds.

The fate of a move for affordable health care for the poor and that proposed 25-cents-a-pack hike in the cigarette tax to fund it probably won't be known until the last day of the session when the budget is approved, according to Melissa Durr, chief executive of Indiana Association of Area Agencies on Aging.

"We do want to see more home and community based services provided by the state," Durr said..

And Durr said she also hoped that the recent lease of the welfare application and eligibility process to an IBM-led consortium would cut down the waiting time from months to days.

Contact news reporter Rick Yencer at 213-5833.

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Of course Dennis would want to sponor a pull tab bill. Have you ever seen him and his wife in action playing pull tabs? They can't get enough!!

Posted: Tue Jan 09, 2007 7:09 am

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