

INDIANA GENERAL ASSEMBLY: ON THE AGENDA

THIS TIME AROUND

Property taxes, health care and how money should be spent for state programs are top issues facing lawmakers this year.

This year's legislative session begins next week and lasts until April 29.

The session is the first after the November elections, which changed the majority parties across the country. Democrats now lead the Indiana House of Representatives, and Republicans have the majority in the Senate.

Republicans will focus on crafting a balanced budget, bringing more high-paying jobs to Indiana and making sure education is fully funded, said House Minority Leader Brian Bosma, R-Indianapolis.

Democrats' top three priorities are to relieve property taxes, provide health care to Hoosiers and fully fund education, said House Speaker Pat Bauer, D-South Bend.

Legislators will debate issues at the Statehouse for more than three months, discussing the future of Indiana's taxes and laws.

Two new local legislators will begin their first session this year.

State Sen. Greg Walker, who represents Nineveh, Blue River, Needham and Franklin townships, beat former State Sen. Robert Garton in the primary election last year and beat two other opponents in the general election.

State Rep. Milo Smith, who represents central and southern county residents, won the seat of former State Rep. David Young, who decided not to run for re-election last year.

Johnson County has five state senators and four state representatives who represent parts of the county.

Up for discussion

Here is a list of some bills proposed or that legislators plan to introduce that affect Johnson County or could be of interest to residents:

Same-sex marriage

Republicans plan to move forward with the second part of a constitutional amendment that would define marriage as between a man and woman, banning same-sex marriage. House Minority Leader Brian Bosma, R-Indianapolis, said Friday that if the bill passes this year, it will be on the 2008 general election ballot as a referendum to the public.

Status: Not proposed

Township economic boost

County councils could set up Grow Our Local Economy districts in townships where residential properties account for at least 65 percent of the total assessed valuation. The county could set aside state sales and income tax receipts from the districts and use the funds to build needed infrastructure in those districts.

Status: Not proposed

BMV bathrooms

Requires a license branch to be located in a building that has restroom facilities available for use by individuals having business in the branch.

Status: Proposed

Fireworks

A county or municipality may limit the use or hours for use of fireworks by ordinance.

Status: Proposed

Layoff warning

Requires employers with 50 or more employees to give written notice before a plant closing or mass layoff.

Status: Proposed

Smoking and minors

Permits a court to order a one-year suspension of a driver's license or a six-month delay in the issuance of a driver's license to a minor who violates tobacco laws.

Status: Proposed

State-paid textbooks

Provides textbooks to students in public schools at no charge to the student's family. Provides an annual state textbook grant to school corporations of \$95 multiplied by the average daily membership of the school corporation for deposit in the textbook fund.

Status: Proposed

Photographic voyeurism

A person who knowingly or intentionally photographs, records with a video imaging device or videotapes any person who is younger than 16 to arouse or satisfy sexual desires commits photographic voyeurism, a Class D felony.

Status: Proposed

Truthful sentencing

A requirement that convicted, violent offenders would serve at least 85 percent of their sentence.

Status: Not proposed

Death of officers

A mandatory death-penalty sentence for anyone who kills a police officer.

Status: Not proposed

Privatization rules

Republicans want to propose a bill that would set requirements for the process or restrict the governor's ability to privatize services, Bauer said.

Next up for legislators: Property taxes

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Lawmakers are again preparing to debate local government funding as property taxes are expected to go up 15 percent statewide this year.

Elected officials at the Statehouse will debate how high taxes should be allowed to go, what other taxes could be added or increased and how much power local government should have in raising money.

Three local legislators are introducing or co-authoring bills that seek to end property taxes or reduce how much governments rely on them for funding. The options range from freezing taxes at their current level and making up the difference with other taxes to eliminating property taxes and studying what funds could replace them.

Last year, legislators approved increasing the homestead credit in 2006, increasing the homestead deduction in 2007 and putting a 2 percent cap on increases in 2008.

The homestead credit and deduction are part of an exemption,



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Sen. Mike Young, R-Indianapolis
Co-author of a bill that would help the state get rid of property taxes in four years

which reduces the amount of money a homeowner is taxed on.

The amount of taxes an owner pays depends on the property's worth, or assessed value, and the rate determined for the local taxing district. Property owners pay the rate for every \$100 of assessed valuation after deductions and credits, such as the homestead credit, are figured in. One homestead exemption may be claimed for the residence a homeowner lives in.

This year, despite a \$10,000 increase in the homestead deduction, which reduces the value a home is assessed at thereby lowering how much homeowners pay in taxes, taxpayers face hikes from the loss of the inventory tax and a new way to calculate the value of homes, one analyst said.

Legislators say now is the time to get rid of property taxes.

Two local legislators plan to co-author a bill that seeks to freeze property taxes at their current level, but not necessarily to get rid of the system altogether.

The bill would require a constitutional amendment to hold taxes

at their current level. Any increases in expenses would be funded by hikes in income or sales taxes, said State Sen. Brent Waltz, who represents parts of Greenwood and the Center Grove area.

Local governments would decide which tax to use to pay for expenses, he said.

For some areas, such as Greenwood, an increased sales tax would likely be the most beneficial because of money the city receives from retail businesses. In other areas, where homes outnumber businesses, the income tax might make the most sense, he said.

The bill would hold local governments and schools accountable for the money they spend, since they would be required to promote the increase to taxpayers, he said.

State Sen. Mike Young, who represents part of the Center Grove area, is also co-authoring the bill that he hopes will help the state get rid of property taxes in four years.

"For the first time, we would truly be the owners of our property as opposed to renting from the government," he said.

A second bill proposed by a local legislator also would seek

the end of property taxes but doesn't propose a replacement.

State Rep. Woody Burton, who represents Greenwood, the White-land area and part of Franklin, hopes to start a discussion about how to repeal property taxes.

His bill wouldn't propose a replacement for property taxes. Instead, he wants legislators to start the discussion and find a way to get rid of property taxes in Indiana in the next four years, he said.

Increasing state sales and income taxes could help replace property taxes and is an option that has been discussed by local officials recently, he said.

"It's not necessarily what will happen, but it needs to be discussed at length," Burton said.

Mayors from both Greenwood and Franklin have supported Hometown Matters, a proposal that would allow local governments to replace some of their income from property taxes by increasing other taxes, such as the income and sales taxes.

The proposal is set to go before legislators this year. If approved, local governments would have the option to approve it as early as July.

• Beltway

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE ONE)

Those questions, and many others, will be answered after studies, expected to take two years to conduct, are completed, said Jane Jankowski, the governor's press secretary.

"These things take a while. You don't do them in a matter of weeks," Jankowski said.

The proposed 75-mile toll road would pass through Johnson County, south of Franklin. Local officials have estimated it would be between State Roads 44 and 252. The state has not released specific information, leaving residents unsure about the future of their land and homes.

Landowners are frustrated, wondering when they will get the information they want. A group of residents and an environmental group plan to meet next week and hope to see state officials there ready to give some answers.

As of Friday, a bill proposing the beltway to be tolled and built by a private company had not been filed. Officials from the governor's office, INDOT, local legislators, House Minority Leader Brian Bosma, R-Indianapolis, and House Speaker Patrick Bauer, D-South Bend, said they don't know which legislator is sponsoring the bill.

If the proposal is passed, local officials and landowners might have little chance to fight it.

INDOT officials and Daniels have said they want to conduct public meetings about the project to get feedback from those affected.

That feedback will be part of the studies to consider the feasibility of the project, Jorczak said.

Getting that information before the proposal goes before state legislators this year is unlikely. All bills that will be heard in this year's legislative session must be filed by Jan. 16.

Tired of waiting for state action, landowners in Morgan County partnered with an environmental organization to have their own meeting.

"People want to know what's going on. They're tired of being left in the dark about this," said Brenda Buster, a member of Concerned Citizens of Morgan County.

Buster owns land in Morgan County near where the beltway is proposed. She's also concerned about the future of the Interstate 69 extension from Evansville to Indianapolis, which would cut through her business on State Road 37 in Martinsville.

Since the beltway was proposed, Buster said she's gotten little information about the project and has heard from concerned nearby landowners who want to know more.

IF YOU GO

A group of Morgan County landowners and an environmental group are planning a meeting on the proposed Indiana Commerce Connector, a toll road that would go from Madison County to Hendricks County and cut through Johnson County. They have invited state legislators and officials and hope to be able to share more information with concerned landowners.

When: 7 p.m. Thursday

Where: Martinsville High School auditorium, 1360 E. Gray St., Martinsville

Who is invited: Anyone interested in the beltway

For more information: Call Brenda Buster at (765) 349-5920

State government also is planning a meeting about the beltway.

When: 6 to 8 p.m. Jan. 22

Where: Franklin College, Branigan Room of Napolitan Student Center on Forsythe Street

They can't wait any longer for the state to hold meetings, she said.

"We thought, 'We're going to take the initiative.' We've been waiting and waiting, but no one's announced anything. We're going to do it," she said.

She sent notices to 4,000 landowners and also invited local state legislators, the governor and other state officials.

Her hope is to have a meeting where landowners can get answers to their questions about both projects.

One local legislator said if the state builds the beltway, I-69 will not need to be expanded north of Martinsville, possibly relieving some concerns from landowners.

State Sen. Brent Waltz, R-Greenwood, said cost estimates to purchase land to expand State Road 37 into an interstate were higher than expected along the highway northeast of Martinsville, in southern Indianapolis and Johnson County.

He expects that if the toll road were built, motorists would use it to reach I-69 northeast of Marion County near Pendleton.

Motorists headed to Indianapolis would still use State Road 37, but the road likely won't become I-69, meaning it won't be as wide and won't have restrictive exits, he said.

Past plans have shown the eight-lane interstate slicing through White River Township along State Road 37, with three Johnson County exits at Smith Valley Road, State Road 144 and County Line Road.

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