May 29, 2015

Attention turns to Senate for employee rights, budget debates

The madness surrounding the House budget debate last week subsided with its passage, and with the Senate yet to release its proposal, legislators turned their focus to bills that made the crossover deadline this week.

For SEANC, that meant one bill consumed most of our lobbying efforts. House Bill 495, which would change several key aspects of state employment, including due process and political hirings provisions, was heard in the Senate Pensions & Retirement and Aging Committee on Wednesday.

SEANC was able to convince three senators to call for amendments on items on which we disagree. Sen. Jane Smith (D-Robeson) ran an amendment to change a part of the bill that would essentially give the State Human Resources Commission the ability to set policies governing state employment. This constitutes "lawmaking" and circumvents the normal legislative process. It also violates the state constitution, which states that only legislators have the authority to create laws.

Another amendment offered by Sen. Paul Lowe (D-Forsyth) dealt with a portion of the bill that would open performance records up to hiring managers when a state employee applies for a different position in state government. And a third, offered by Sen. Ronald Rabin (R-Harnett) would make the state hire the "most qualified" candidate for a job rather than just someone who is "qualified."

All three amendments failed in the committee, and the bill passed with a favorable report through voice vote though there was controversy over whether or not it had actually received a majority of the votes. No one called for a paper vote, so the bill was sent to the Senate floor.

The bill was scheduled to be heard on Thursday, but was pulled. SEANC continues to lobby senators to offer the three amendments on the floor during the vote. It is scheduled to return to the floor on Wednesday.

Senate budget expected in the next two weeks

There has been little chatter in the halls of the legislature about the Senate's budget proposal this week. Some indications say it could be voted on as early as the week of June 10, meaning the proposal would have to be made public by at least June 8.

SEANC continues to remind senators that state employees have fallen behind the price of goods and services over the last five years to the point that salaries aren't worth nearly as much as they were. This has resulted in a net salary decrease for state employees in that time of almost 7 percent. Retiree cost-of-living adjustments have been even worse, resulting in a net decrease in buying power of more than 8 percent for our state's retirees over the last five years.

Last week's House budget proposal included a 2-percent raise and 40 hours of bonus leave for state employees and a 2-percent cost-of-living adjustment for retirees. SEANC continues to lobby senators to go at least this far and even extend those figures in their proposal.

Contact your legislators

Now is the time for you to contact your lawmakers. Make your voice heard on the need for all state employees to receive a pay raise and all retirees to receive a cost-of-living increase. We need all hands on deck. Help your legislators put a face to state employees, SEANC and their constituents. Not sure who your legislators are? Click here. Curious whether they were endorsed by EMPAC? Click here. Want to make note of all of SEANC's legislative priorities before talking to them? Click here.

SEANC staff can also help you schedule meetings with your lawmakers and make sure you have the most up-to-date information possible about SEANC's legislative priorities, so you can have a good and productive conversation. All you have to do is let us know you're coming. Just email tbooe@seanc.org or call 800-222-2758.

Can't make it to Raleigh? No problem. You can call, write or email your legislators – or even schedule your own time to meet with them in your hometown. Again, you can find your lawmakers and their contact information here.