



LEGISLATIVE *Update*

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SEANC welcomes lawmakers as General Assembly begins ***Members arrive at Legislative Building to advocate for state employees.***

SEANC members and lobbyists descended on the Legislative Building Thursday as the 2015 General Assembly convened for the first time.

Wednesday's session was primarily for housekeeping purposes to set rules and formally elect leaders. EMPAC-endorsed lawmakers will lead each chamber – House Speaker Rep. Tim Moore (R-Cleveland) and Senate President Pro Tempore Sen. Phil Berger (R-Rockingham).

But while the General Assembly won't begin the actual process of legislating until they return on Jan. 28, Opening Day did give SEANC a chance to welcome senators and representatives and remind them of the importance of North Carolina's vital public services and the people who provide them.

Leading the charge Wednesday was District 2 Chairwoman Dodie Collins and District 1 Chairman Tony Rickman, who brought a group down from western North Carolina.

The eight members, along with [SEANC's lobbying team](#), spent the day meeting with their local legislators as well as other legislative leaders.

"It was nice opportunity. I think it's important for legislators to get to know that there are real people behind those jobs. Sometimes they just look at us on paper and don't see there are real people doing those jobs, like working in prisons, working on the roads, working in the courthouse, the hospitals. They see us as names on a piece of paper and don't see us as real people. It's just going up to them, shaking



A group of SEANC members from western North Carolina attended the 2015 General Assembly's Opening Day on Wednesday, Jan. 14, to meet their lawmakers and advocate for state employees. Pictured are District 1 Chairman Tony Rickman, left, Rep. Joe Sam Queen (D-Haywood), and District 2 members Gerry Stamm, Cindy Crawford, Chairwoman Dodie Collins, Doug Ledford, June Watkins and Cliff Johnson.

their hand, so they know we're out there working. We're doing what their laws tell us to do," Collins said. "We're a constituent, but we're also a state employee; we're also a taxpayer."

Rickman, who was at the General Assembly for the first time, said he found the experience educational and thinks it will be helpful when he's talking to his legislators in the future.

"I think it's good, especially for us being out in the west, for the representatives to see people from their district actually make the trip to Raleigh. It's not a short trip and it shows that we care," Rickman said.

The meetings also gave SEANC members and lobbyists the opportunity to make lawmakers aware of the association's [top legislative priorities](#) – No. 1 of which is securing a meaningful pay raise of 5 percent for state employees. Other priorities include the opposition to privatization and downsizing of state services, reform and transparency for the state pension system and the protection of state employee due process rights.

Advocating for state retirement benefits

SEANC's lobbyists also were at the state Retirement Systems Board of Trustees meeting Thursday to advocate for retiree benefits.

Speaking to the board prior to its vote on its recommendation to the General Assembly, [SEANC Government Relations Director Ardis Watkins](#) stood up for state employees and retirees, imploring the board to ask legislators for an increase in the retirement formula to 1.83 percent and a 2 percent cost-of-living adjustment.

The state could pay for this, she said, by keeping the annual required contribution – the amount the General Assembly allocates to each employees' retirement – at 9.15% and renegotiating the hundreds of millions of dollars in fees the state is now paying annually on investments.

A 1-percent COLA amounts to around \$17 more per month for the average retiree, according the Treasurer's office. SEANC's proposal would equate a 2.5 percent increase in retirees' checks on average, around \$40 more per month by the Treasurer's estimation.



Government Affairs Director Ardis Watkins advocates for state retirees before the state Retirement Systems Board of Trustees meeting Thursday.

“A 2.5 percent difference is not as large as our members would want, but we believe it is reasonable,” Watkins told the board. “Employees and retirees want to see that their system is doing something and taking care of them the way it is intended to. They’ve gotten lost in the shuffle.”

The board, however, voted for an option presented by state Treasurer Janet Cowell’s office to recommend that the General Assembly reduce its ARC, essentially “giving back” \$6.9 million to the legislature. The board also requested a 1-percent cost-of-living adjustment for retirees.

The board’s recommendation comes after the October actuarial report showed the system would require funding at just 8.69 percent and would not need the \$45.5 million allotted in last year’s budget.

Presented with four options by the Treasurer’s staff, the board was split on which to choose. Three votes were needed before a final recommendation was agreed upon.

One option – to “give back” the entire \$45.5 million to the legislature – failed by a 5-4 vote, as did another to keep the ARC and use the extra funds for a 0.55 percent COLA and an increase to the retirement formula. The motion that eventually passed also was a 5-4 decision.

It’s important to note that these are just recommendations and that the Retirement Systems Board of Trustees does not make the final decision on COLAs or funding. The legislature will decide on its own how to fund the system and whether or not to give COLAs as part of the state budget.

SEANC will continue to work with legislators to ensure that state employees and retirees have a say in those negotiations.

Talk to your legislators

Having members meeting with lawmakers for one day isn’t enough. SEANC’s lobbying team needs everyone’s help throughout the whole session. Because this year is what is known as the long session when the General Assembly will be setting a new two-year budget, lawmakers are expected to be in Raleigh from now at least through July 1 and likely into August. That means there is plenty of opportunity for you to come sit down with your state senators and representatives and help them 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](#).

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 or 919-810-0272.

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 [here](#).