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Legislative session ends in cooperation



Joe Pyrah and Rette Speight - DAILY HERALD

It was a year when a \$613 million surplus was a disappointment (\$340 million less than first expected) and "Kumbayah" became lawmakers' theme song. It was a year when immigration reform got some real teeth and teachers got more real raises. It was a year when health care got millions and Interstate 15 was approved for billions. The 2008 legislative session came to a close Wednesday and with it nearly 500 bills and an \$11.5 billion budget.

Immigration

A legislative session that was supposed to be about education and health care instead made most of its noise over illegal immigration. A massive bill run by Sen. Bill Hickman, R-St. George, awaits the governor's signature and several resolutions urge Congress to stop making excuses and get something done.

"Congress has failed us miserably... you can't build a society on an illegal footing," Hickman said. He said that although he would have preferred the bill in its original form, the final product is still beneficial to society and will discourage illegal and undocumented workers from coming to Utah. It covers everything from local police enforcing federal law to who the state can contract with for work to making it a Class A misdemeanor for a person to transport an illegal alien. The bill's implementation date was delayed a year (it goes into effect in July 2009) to allow various agencies and organizations a chance to prepare for the changes.

Lawmakers repeatedly said immigration was the top concern of constituents, often overshadowing perennial list-topper education. And when they ignored immigration bills or found them too harsh, they were flooded with e-mails, mostly from an older set of voters, said Senate President John Valentine, R-Orem.

While the governor threatened to veto several of the harsher immigration bills, he said Wednesday that the sweeping Senate Bill 81 and House Bill 171, which is sharply focused on driving privilege cards, will most likely be signed into law. Driving privilege cards are given to people who don't have a social security number, instead of driver's licenses. The driving privilege card bill prohibits the cards to be used as ID to buy alcohol, doesn't allow for temporary cards while people are waiting for permanent ones, and requires people applying for the cards to have auto insurance.

Education

Lawmakers did find enough for another teacher raise, an admittedly lower \$1,700 than the \$2,500 they wanted. But some last-minute finagling by the governor netted new teachers a \$1,000 signing bonus and provided \$20 million for merit bonuses for other teachers.

"We really put our money where our mouth was," Valentine said.

Educators say they appreciate the money, but they disagree with the Legislature's methods. They would rather see money dumped into the weighted pupil unit, which would allow individual districts to make decisions about where it goes.

Instead, millions of dollars target math, science and special education teachers as well as arts programs and school buses.

Health Care

After much initial fanfare, health care reform got its day in the sun and then disappeared for much of the session. House Bill 133 sets up a framework for studying reform that could take years.

But there has been some immediate relief provided by the Legislature. For those paying for all of their own health insurance, \$18 million has been set aside for tax breaks.

"One of the corner stones in moving forward is to see people enter into the private market," said Elizabeth Garbe of the Utah Health Policy Project. So far, she said, only about 12 percent of Utahns know about the "Utah's Premium Partnership" program.

The program helps Utahns pay their monthly health insurance premiums through their employers' health insurance plans.

Garbe also addressed the excitement buzzing around House Bill 131, which will get "the low hanging fruit" of Utah. The bill would allow the state and private groups to spend money to educate low-income residents about existing health care options that are underused. Getting people informed about the programs they are eligible for will be a strong way to utilize the health care systems already in place, she said.