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In Our View / Legislature

Lawmakers face a long list for a short session

By The Herald Editorial Board

Here's how we know the Legislature will wrap up its session, which started Monday, in the scheduled 60 days: Lawmakers, like other state officials, are barred by state law from campaign fundraising for the 30 days prior and 30 days following the legislative session. Have we mentioned this is an election year?

So, 60 days it is.

Let's look at some of what we'd like to see get done in that time:

Education: Despite progress and an increase in spending, specifically for K-3 education, the state Supreme Court wasn't impressed at the end of last year's legislative session. It said lawmakers had failed to show a detailed plan for how they plan to meet a 2018 deadline to fix education funding and remove the onus from local school levies to provide a significant portion of support for basic education.

Many lawmakers, including Republicans in the Senate, say they need more time and more data from school districts and others to draft such a solution, work that they want to tackle in 2017. The Legislature made modest progress during a record 176-day session last year; they're not likely to settle on a fix in 60 days.

The problem, aside from the court's \$100,000-day fine that now weighs in a \$14 million, is that many school districts are facing a "levy cliff." Most school districts, which have come to rely upon levy funds to help pay teachers, will see a reduction in how much they can collect in local levies, a reduction that was scheduled in anticipation of the Legislature fixing the problem. Even if lawmakers meet their 2018 deadline, school districts must begin planning budget cuts this year so they can send out pink slips to teachers and other staff in 2017.

Lawmakers should push out the effective date of the "cliff" and not make school districts pay for the additional time legislators say they need.

Charter schools: There are now two proposals for making the voter-approved charter school system compliant with another state Supreme Court decision that said charter schools weren't eligible for state funding because they weren't subject to voter oversight through a school district board. One plan would put the charter schools under school district board authority. A second would fund the schools with revenue from the state's lottery program. The former appears to more closely meet the court's requirement for public accountability.

Mental health: Gov. Jay Inslee's supplemental budget provides funding to bolster the state's mental health system and add staffing of nurses, psychiatrists and others at Western State Hospital, which is under federal court order to more timely provide competency screenings for mentally ill defendants. Federal agencies are threatening to pull their funding because of poor care, and Kevin Quigley, the head of the Department of Social and Health Services has announced his departure.

The Legislature's attention is needed here even more than on the error that allowed the early release of state inmates who were not eligible for shortened sentences for “good time.”

Transportation: The passage of a 16-year, \$16.2 billion transportation package — and a gas tax increase to pay for it — was a major accomplishment last year. Officials with the Snohomish County Cities association were also pleased with the \$670 million set aside for projects in the county. But much of the spending is spread out over the next 16 years. The cities hope to win legislative approval for some flexibility in shifting money among projects so planning and other preparatory work can begin on specific projects.

One project would, as is done on the U.S. 2 trestle east of Everett, allow peak-time traffic on I-5 to drive on the shoulder between Everett and Marysville, a major choke point.

Everett is joining the county and its other cities in seeking \$3 million in the supplemental budget for design and early planning work for renovating and strengthening the U.S. 2 trestle. Money for that project dropped off the transportation budget last year, but area lawmakers advised local officials to bring it back this year for consideration.

Gun safety: Lawmakers should pass legislation that has been waiting for a vote for three years that would require firearms accessible to children under 16 be secured in a locked box, with a trigger lock or other method of secure storage.

As important as campaign fundraising is to legislators, they also count on a record of success in passing legislation and budgets and finding solutions. Action on these issues and others will mean something to voters.

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