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EYE ON OLYMPIA: Legislators' priorities include mental health, education aspects of Gov. Inslee's supplemental budget

By Chris McDaniel

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OLYMPIA — As state lawmakers begin the second week of the session today, North Olympic Peninsula legislators are focusing on the goals of the governor's 2016 supplemental budget.

The supplemental budget calls for adjustments to the \$38 billion biennial operating budget approved last year.

In his State of the State address last week, Gov. Jay Inslee "set up what he thinks the priorities are for the budget and for the session," State Rep. Steve Tharinger, D-Sequim, said Friday.

"They kind of align with most of what the Legislature is thinking about."

Tharinger — along with Rep. Kevin Van De Wege, D-Sequim, and Sen. Jim Hargrove, D-Hoquiam — represents the 24th District, which covers Clallam and Jefferson counties and part of Grays Harbor County.

Along with public education funding, a major component of the supplemental budget concerns mental health care.

The supplemental budget provides more than \$137 million — including \$44 million through the state's general fund — to provide better treatment for mental health patients.

All told, the budget funds about 62 additional medical staff positions — including 51 registered nurses — and makes investments to improve staff recruitment and retention rates at state psychiatric hospitals.

Hargrove said Friday he believes the supplemental budget "won't be all that controversial this year, but there are some things that need to be fixed that are fairly significant — mental health out at Western State [Hospital] being one of them."

Federal regulators, in 2015, threatened several times to cut millions of dollars in funding to the hospital because of dangerous conditions for patients, according to the Associated Press.

Officials with the Behavioral Health and Service Integration Administration, the state agency that oversees Western State Hospital, said in October they are addressing the

problems, but need more money and staff to make the facility safe.

State legislators are tackling the problem of how to provide such funding, Hargrove said.

Last week, “we had a work session on the mental health portions of [the budget] because we’ve got some things we are going to have to do to make sure we stay in compliance with the federal government at Western State,” Hargrove said.

The loss of federal funds would be significant: The 800-bed hospital receives \$4.7 million from Medicaid and \$11.2 million from Medicare each year.

“That is why we’ve got to make sure we do the job right,” Hargrove said. “We are talking a whole lot of money.”

Hargrove, a ranking member of the Senate Ways & Means Committee, said he is pursuing additional funding for a project at the shuttered landfill in Port Angeles to shore up a failing bluff and keep garbage from tumbling into the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

About \$7 million was earmarked in the state’s capital budget for 2015-17.

Another \$3 million is needed to complete the project, Hargrove said.

“The governor’s capital budget didn’t put enough in the account to get that done, so me and the rest of our delegation have some work to do to get that done this year,” he said.

Van De Wege said Friday that two bills he has introduced that specifically focus on Jefferson County were discussed during hearings this past week.

“One of them is for some folks in Port Townsend that want to start an electric vehicle bus type service, and they need to drive the electric bus on a small portion of [state] Highway 20,” Van De Wege said.

“State law currently does not allow [such] electric vehicles on state highways.”

Van De Wege’s bill includes “a small modification to allow [electric buses] on low speed state highways, and the [Thursday] hearing for that went really well. People were receptive, so I think that bill will move forward.”

The top speed would be 30 mph, he said.

Another of Van De Wege’s bills aims to prevent developers of the proposed Pleasant Harbor Resort in Brinnon from clear-cutting timber on the property.

“Last summer there was an issue in Port Ludlow around logging,” Van De Wege said.

“The resort owner . . . did some clear cut logging. The county put a stop to it, but we are trying to change an RCW to ensure that doesn’t happen again in the future.”

Van De Wege and his colleagues are “trying to get that figured out,” he continued, but it is

a “complicated issue because there are other master plan resorts than just Port Ludlow around the state, and some of them need to do some timber harvest for forest health.”

As such, “I am not sure how that one is going to turn out,” he said.

Other bills on Van De Wege’s list would allow Olympic Game Farm, in limited circumstances, to take in exotic animals that are being outlawed in other states, and would restrict outdoor burning and all fireworks during the summer months.

Lawmakers also are keen to address the McCleary decision, named for Stephanie McCleary, a Sequim native and Chimacum parent and school district human resources director.

McCleary was the lead plaintiff in a state Supreme Court decision in 2012 directing the Legislature to fund basic public education.

“We are discussing it,” Van De Wege said.

“I believe there will be some policy legislation we will do around education that we will probably start doing in about the third week this session,” he said.

“The appropriations committee will look at funding, although I can tell you now there isn’t going to be much money to spend.”

The question “is whether the court will accept a plan as opposed to dollars for the K-12 McCleary case,” Tharinger said.

“I don’t know if we will have legislation that will pass that will actually answer it, but there is a lot of work and there will be a time line to handle it next year in the biennial budget.”

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