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Statehouse Report

March 23, 2009

Three weeks of committee meetings remain for both the House and Senate as the Indiana General Assembly continues through the second half of the legislative session. Final agreements on key provisions such as the state budget, unemployment, and a state stimulus plan have not yet been reached.

State Stimulus Dollars

The “state stimulus plan” passed by the House has received a hearing in the Senate, but it is not yet clear how the Senate plans to modify the bill. [HB 1656](#) as passed by the House would provide \$1 billion to either pay for local projects ineligible for federal stimulus dollars or help make regional projects “shovel ready” and eligible for the federal stimulus by paying for planning and engineering costs. Members of the [Senate Appropriations Committee](#) will continue their consideration of the bill this week.

Also last week, Michael Reed, the new Commissioner for the [Indiana Department of Transportation](#), told a joint meeting of the House Transportation and Environment committees that he will meet the June 30 deadline for Indiana to commit at least \$230 million in federal stimulus money to specific infrastructure projects around the state. Indiana will receive \$657 million in highway funding through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, and all of it must be spent by the end of 2012.

Unemployment

The [Senate Tax and Fiscal Policy Committee](#) voted to approve a plan to raise funds to pay back federal dollars used to help Indiana replenish its unemployment compensation fund. [House Bill 1379](#) was amended to include a one-time surcharge of ten percent on what employers pay this year for the unemployment premium, as well as lower benefit levels for workers. The bill passed committee by a [9-3 vote](#) and now heads to the full Senate for debate before negotiations with the House.

Indiana currently is borrowing money from the federal government to keep the fund afloat—nearly \$554 million as of March 11, a number that will grow to more than \$1 billion by the end of the year. The state expects to pay out about \$1.3 billion in benefits this year, while taking in \$550 million.

Meanwhile, Indiana has jumped to first in the nation for the biggest increase in new jobless claims. The Labor Department said Thursday that Indiana had 22,494 new jobless claims for the week ending March 7, a jump of more than 5,600 from the previous week. Behind Indiana were Pennsylvania, Texas, Florida and Michigan. Elkhart County posted the biggest increase in its unemployment rate since last year, with a jump of 13 percentage points to 18.3 percent in January.

The [Indiana Department of Workforce Development](#) has also extended unemployment benefits by using federal stimulus money. Last week, the state added 13 weeks of assistance to current programs that now provide 59 weeks of aid, making jobless compensation available for as long as 72 weeks.

Education

Newly elected [Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Bennett](#) told Indiana school superintendents in a memo that starting in 2009-10, he would not approve waivers that allowed schools to fall short of 180 full days of classes. Currently, schools are able to sign a waiver to avoid financial penalty from the Department of Education for not making up snow days, and are allowed half days for parent-teacher conferences to count toward the 180-day requirement.

Environment

The [Indiana Department of Environmental Management](#) announced that toxic chemical pollution in the state fell 3.4 percent in 2007. Public information on toxic releases is made available by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's [Toxics Release Inventory](#).

However, the change in reported emissions coincides with a change in reporting requirements that raised the threshold at which the releases had to be disclosed. Even with the slight decrease in reported releases, Indiana remains the third worst in the nation for pollutants – behind only Alaska and Ohio.

Indiana judge nominated for U.S. Court of Appeals

President Barack Obama picked an Indiana federal judge for his first judicial nomination, with the support of both of Indiana's senators. David Hamilton, a federal district judge for 14 years, was nominated to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 7th Circuit in Chicago, the last stop before the Supreme Court for cases from Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin.

Senate Bills of interest that have passed out of the House

[SB 136](#) - Indiana businesses

[SB 202](#) - Lead-based paint activities

[SB 270](#) - Occupational certification requirements

[SB 423](#) - Substitute natural gas contracts

[SB 465](#) - Department of labor administrative matters

House Bills of interest that have passed out of the Senate

[HB1037](#) - Product transfer between beer wholesalers

[HB1081](#) - Rental property foreclosure notices

[HB1165](#) - Public safety survivors tuition and fee exemption

[HB1193](#) - E85 fueling station grant program

[HB1358](#) - Eligibility for purchasing property at tax sales

[HB1389](#) - Twenty-first century scholars

[HB1514](#) - Accounting for public funds

How to track legislative action.

The [web page for the Indiana General Assembly](#) is a free resource for the public that provides some helpful tools to follow the progress of legislative action during the session. You can [find out how to contact your legislator](#), read [all of the filed bills](#), and search the [Indiana Constitution](#), [Indiana Code](#), and [Indiana Register](#).

You can also watch live streaming video of the legislature while it is in session, as well as some committee meetings, [here](#).

The regularly updated House and Senate Committee schedules are also available online and contain links to legislation up for consideration in committee.

[House Committee Schedule](#)

[Senate Committee Schedule](#)



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