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LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

By State Representative Ron Crimm

Budget Shortfall Takes Center Stage as the 2010 General Assembly Convenes

Even before the Speaker's gavel fell at noon on Tuesday, January 5, my colleagues and I had already received a taste of what the 144th Regular Session of the Kentucky General Assembly would hold in store for us.

On Wednesday and Thursday, I attended ethics training that is required each regular legislative session for all members of the General Assembly. This year, we heard from Norman J. Ornstein, a long time observer of Congress and a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. We also took part in a discussion focused on ethics and corruption problems that have recently arisen in other state legislatures.

Wednesday concluded with the Governor presenting his State of the Commonwealth address. After declaring the first half of his gubernatorial tenure successful, he went on to offer his legislative agenda. This includes providing funds to the state's Medicaid system to pay for smoking cessation programs, which could cost the state around \$1.5 million annually, support for legislation proposing to increase the school dropout age to 18, a move that might require \$15 million a year in funding, and finally, writing and passing a balanced, biennial budget.

While the Governor claims his first two years have been an "indisputable success", we must be frank in understanding the shape our Commonwealth is currently. Instead of reflecting on the past, I am focusing on the future and committed to taking the necessary steps to provide assurance to you and restore financial viability to our Commonwealth. I admit the problems we are faced with offer no simple solutions. Yet, I am fully committed to working with every member in a bipartisan, bicameral manner to usher our state through these uncertain times.

To date, more than 200 bills have been filed for consideration with numerous others requested for drafting this week alone. Some legislative committees have already begun meeting and over the next three months, all 16 of our House Committees will meet to debate the merits of these measures, hear testimony from bill sponsors, presentations from industry experts, and from constituents with interest in the topic at hand.

Without question, the state's biennial 2010-2012 budget will be the paramount issue placed before us this session. The state spending plan, which is formulated every two years, includes funding for education, road projects, and the many state agencies that

keep Kentucky's government up and running. As in the previous budget cycle, we are once again faced with a budget shortfall of an amplified magnitude.

On January 19th, the Governor will present his budget request and we will work to fund a budget that keeps vital services intact while working within the fiscal constraints we are now faced with. As a Kentucky taxpayer, I feel the burden that we are placed under and it is my goal to find sensible ways to balance the budget.

We also will deal with several other critical issues in order to improve the condition of our Commonwealth. Legislation has been filed regarding to restructuring our regressive and outdated tax system, protecting domestic violence victims, enhancing educational achievements, and increasing state government's financial transparency along with a handful of constitutional amendments.

Although not mentioned by the Governor in his address, I fully expect the House will be thoroughly involved in debating the merits of allowing the placement of Video Lottery Terminals at horse race tracks. This measure is currently only contained in a Senate Bill, but is sure to make its way onto the House Floor. This legislative hot potato invokes many different scenarios and I have no doubt there will be many heated discussions before this issue is laid to rest, either favorably or unfavorably.

As we continue to debate the budget and all other pending legislation, I will continue to update you on our progress. In the meantime, I can be reached here, at home, or through the toll-free message line in Frankfort at 1-800-372-7181. A taped message containing information on legislative committee meeting schedules is available by calling 1-800-633-9650. If you have internet access, you can e-mail me at ron.crimm@lrc.ky.gov or keep track through the Kentucky Legislature Home Page: <http://www.lrc.ky.gov>.

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