

Leaders say Wyoming Legislature making good progress

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Friday, February 29, 2008 2:05 AM MST

CHEYENNE -- With just over a week left to go in the budget session, leaders of the Wyoming Legislature met with reporters on Thursday to emphasize that they're working well together and getting things done efficiently.

"A good solid budget is going to be delivered to the people. Our budget conference process continues," said House Speaker Roy Cohee, R-Casper.

Cohee and other lawmakers said that flat revenue projections for the next two years generally have kept lawmakers from requesting huge requests to fund new projects. He said legislators knew coming into the session, "that we had to exercise some form of discipline."

The basic cost of operating state government has grown quickly in recent years. That fact, combined with slack state revenue projections, has forced lawmakers to curb spending.

Mike McVay of the state's Department of Administration and Information said recently that the cost of government will run about \$2.9 billion for the coming two-year budget cycle. He said that figure discounted one-time expenditures such as capital construction projects and extraordinary agency requests. He said figure for the two-year budget cycle that ends this summer was \$2.6 billion.

Senate Majority Floor Leader Sen. John Hines, R-Gillette, told reporters Thursday that he believes state government has grown faster than it should in recent years.

State financial experts say Wyoming can count on energy revenues to continue and increase. But Hines said he's seen state revenues fall twice since he started in the Legislature in the 1980s as the state's energy industry has ebbed and flowed.

Cohee said he believes bills moving through the session that would set a legal framework for capture and storage of carbon gas will prove to be important to the state.

The carbon bills would specify that landowners have the right to store carbon gas and similar substances below the surface of the ground. A companion bill would set out the framework for state regulation of carbon injection.

"I think Wyoming is taking an incredible lead, not only in this country, but around the world," Cohee said.

Cohee said that without addressing environmental concerns, the state's vast coal reserves would be "essentially worthless, and useless."

In other spending measures, Cohee noted that the Legislature's pending budget bill calls for putting \$200 million in state funding into the state's highway system.

Local governments are in line to receive \$350 million from the state in the pending budget bill. Differences between House and Senate recommendations of how to allocate the money are being addressed in ongoing conference committee meetings.

Senate President John Schiffer, R-Kaycee, said the Legislature has worked in a nonpartisan manner, "as opposed to some of the things we read about and hear about on TV in Washington."

Schiffer said people in Wyoming expect legislators to "come together in a manner that benefits the entire state, irrespective of political party."

House Majority Floor Leader Rep. Colin Simpson, R-Cody, said he expects Wyoming citizens will see some

property tax relief come out of the session. Several bills are pending on the subject.

"I come from a community that's been severely impacted," Simpson said of rising property values. He said people from out of state commonly drive up values by paying high prices.