

State legislators view smaller surplus

Wolves, smoking, property tax relief likely to come up

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CODY - Despite a national economy in turmoil and sinking energy prices, Wyoming is still likely to see a significant budget surplus this year, said Rep. Colin Simpson.

Simpson, the newly elected speaker of the House of Representatives, joined fellow Park County legislators Rep. Pat Childers and Sen. Hank Coe Monday in giving Cody business and community leaders a preview of the upcoming legislative session, which begins Jan. 13 in Cheyenne.

Previous sessions "have been dominated by money and excess revenues," but the most recent projections for 2009 show a likely budget surplus of roughly \$100 million, down from an earlier estimate of \$400 million, Simpson said.

"So it looks as though we will have some tough decisions to make in backing off on some of those additional dollars. Even though we are not cutting anything - we are only cutting the amount of the increases," he said.

Home values around much of the state have remained strong, and property tax relief is likely to be a major issue in the session.

Simpson said he was sponsoring a bill that would reduce state taxes on residential properties from 9.5 percent to 8.25 percent.

"That would add up to about \$44 million for one year," he said, adding that his plan would have the state pay that amount to local governments, but not replace about \$8 million in lost taxes that otherwise would have gone to school districts.

The House Travel, Recreation, Wildlife and Cultural Resources Committee is working on a bill that would address concerns raised by a federal judge about Wyoming's wolf management plan, said Childers, who chairs the committee.

Childers said the bill clarifies how the state will manage wolves to ensure genetic diversity among at least 15 breeding pairs, but still classifies the animal as a predator across most of the state.

"We do not eliminate predator status, but we do give Game and Fish flexibility to go trophy game statewide if they need to, with pockets of predators as necessary," he said.

Childers said he thought it would be unlikely for federal wildlife officials to accept state wolf management plans in Idaho and Montana while classifying the animals as endangered in Wyoming.

"Personally, I think they can't get away with that. There has been a decision in another Circuit Court that says they can't separate us like that," he said.

Wyoming continues to lead the region in per-student spending and teacher salaries, said Coe, who chairs the Senate Education Committee.

The findings of a statewide task force organized last year to study community colleges may mean a change in how major building projects are funded, Coe said.

"The state builds all the schools for K through 12, and we fund all the buildings for the University of Wyoming, so I suspect the state will end up funding buildings at community colleges as well," he said.

The state currently funds about 65 percent of the total operating budgets for Wyoming's seven community colleges, Coe said.

"We're trying to integrate the state's needs for these schools with the local independence we want to retain, because all seven colleges have distinct features," he said.

Coe said that shrinking state revenues would mean a close watch on spending.

When natural-gas prices fall by \$1 per 1,000 cubic feet in one year, it translates to a drop of up to \$300 million in revenue for the state, he said.

"I think we will approach this session with a conservative nature. The revenues that exist have changed," Coe said.

Coe and Simpson said they had been lobbied heavily to consider a statewide ban on smoking in public places, with the Wyoming Department of Health providing legislators with volumes of information pointing to the benefits of such a ban.

Coe said that no-smoking policies in bars and restaurants amount to business decisions by owners, and that he would "prefer that the government not get involved with those kinds of pocketbook issues."

"I've heard from both sides, and a majority of the people I hear from are in favor of a ban," Simpson said.

"But I'd also like to think that private property rights still mean something, and you can decide what to do in your own building," he said.

Simpson said he would consider supporting a ban on smoking in public places where minors are allowed.

Claudia Wade, marketing director for the Park County Travel Council, said most of the local business owners she had heard from supported a smoking ban.

Some Park County business owners have said privately that they support a smoking ban, but would prefer that the issue be handled by legislators, rather than risk alienating many of their customers.

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