

June 22, 2009

Howdy, Friends O'Farley...

One more week until we must deliver a balanced budget or face government shutdown.

Democrats have the one reasonable plan on the table, but I'm not going to ask you to contact the governor's office to urge Governor Brewer to negotiate with us because she is still not listening to you. Despite your outpouring of support, our Democratic budget is still not being considered by the Republican leadership in the Legislature or the Governor's Office.

The Governor is still pushing ahead on her special action in the state Supreme Court to force the Republican leadership to send their budget bills to her so she can veto them. This is nothing but a sideshow, because no matter what happens, we will be no closer to an agreed-upon budget.

There have been talks between legislative Republicans and the Governor in recent days, and some have hopefully looked toward a budget deal on Friday or Saturday, but the smart money is on a deal done at the last minute next Tuesday, June 30. Or perhaps July 1, with us all locked in the chamber and the clock covered up as we freeze time to serve our purposes.

Unfortunately, it would appear that the most likely scenario for what that budget will contain is not good for our state. Governor Brewer will cave in to the Legislative Republicans and accept a "compromise" that predominantly incorporates the majority leadership's draconian cuts and unworkable accounting gimmicks.

This budget battle is far from academic to many Arizona families. This morning in our House Democratic press briefing, we introduced to the media an incredibly charismatic and articulate 16-year-old named Becca. She reminded me of my 14-year-old daughter, except that she has been fighting a congenital heart defect for her entire life since being given six months to live at the age of 3 months.

She takes 41 pills a day. Just one of those pills costs more than \$5,000 a month. She needs and will continue to need surgery on a regular basis. Commercial health insurance companies will not insure her, so she has been served through a state program called Children's Rehabilitative Services (CRS). As she told her story, even hardened Capitol reporters were brought to tears.

The legislative majority passed - and the governor signed - budget bills earlier this session that slashed CRS funding, and both of their proposed budgets slash CRS even more. It is a very real possibility that the budget cuts to CRS could cause Becca - that charming, witty, vibrant teen who wants to grow up to be a children's intensive care nurse - to die.

The stakes are very high in this battle. Becca is only the tip of a very large iceberg. Thousands upon thousands of Arizonans can have their quality of life - and perhaps even their very lives - taken away by the decisions we make or don't make.

Meanwhile, the onslaught of irrelevant and distracting Senate bills is continuing to wreak havoc on the legislative process. If they are allowed to pass, many of them will wreak havoc on the state.

Even good bills could pass into law with serious flaws because the compressed schedule is adding tremendous pressure to pass bills without any amendments that could have protected us from unintended consequences. The bad bills could turn out to be even worse than any of us can predict.

Senator Sylvia Allen (R-Snowflake) wants anyone over 18 years of age to be able to carry a concealed weapon anywhere at any time without any permit or training (SB1270). She specifically mentioned that she intends her bill to apply to K-12 institutions as well so that she can bring her pistol along when she drops off grandkids at school.

Needless to say, law enforcement does not take kindly to this re-arming of the public, since they would rather not have to assume that all the people they deal with daily are packing heat.

Sen. Allen is one of several legislators who have revealed that they carry guns with them onto the floor during debates. If her bill passes, the public will be able to join in the debate by carrying concealed guns into the public gallery. This should spice up the ratings for Arizona Capitol Television.

We did pass a good Senate bill out of Ways & Means committee this afternoon, SB1403 sponsored by Senator Barbara Leff (R-Phoenix) in collaboration with Rep. Michele Reagan (R-Scottsdale). This would establish a very aggressive tax credit program with clear high-wage job creation goals to attract new renewable (predominantly solar) energy companies to Arizona.

If this bill is able to pass, we will finally be able to compete with California, Nevada, New Mexico, and Oregon for these clean-energy companies of the future, as we diversify our economy. Let's cross our fingers that we can get this through past some of the solar naysayers in the majority party who put up quite a fight in committee.

Another couple of bills of interest should sound familiar to regular readers of the Farley Report. You may remember that in January 2007, I was the first legislator in the nation to introduce a bill to outlaw the dangerous practice of driving while texting (DWT). Many states, and several Arizona cities, have since enacted this ban.

You may also remember that bill- along with my other traffic-safety bills like requiring booster seats for kids under 4'9" and requiring hands-free phones for calls while driving- never received a hearing for the past three sessions in the House Transportation Committee because the chair did not agree with the bills.

I did manage to find a way to bring the DWT ban up for debate on the Senate floor last year. Senator Ron Gould (R-Lake Havasu City) offered up a series of unfriendly amendments in an effort to kill it. When it became apparent that I had been successful in obtaining enough votes to pass, Senate Republican leadership broke their own rules by suspending consideration of the bill in the middle of debate without ever coming back to finish and vote.

Why this trip down memory lane? Because this past week, Senator Al Melvin (R-Saddlebrooke) took up my DWT bill without consulting me and got it heard and passed out of the Senate Military Affairs and Public Safety committee.

Afterwards, he told the media, "I am a Republican. I got it out of committee. It is nice to be in the majority party."

Senator Melvin shouldn't have celebrated too early. Today, his bill lost on the Senate floor, with many of his caucus members in opposition. He also lost a vote to ban smoking in cars with kids. At least Senator Linda Gray who took up my booster seat bill was successful in passing that over to the House.

Perhaps next year, instead of going it alone, Senator Melvin will come over to talk with me about how we can work together to get the DWT ban passed at last. In the meantime, perhaps we can focus on the budget?

Speaking of which, the next Farley Report will come on the auspicious day of next Tuesday, June 30. Should be a few interesting things to read about.

Thanks for staying involved and standing up for the people of this state,
Steve

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