



Week in Review: Corbett looks to future as lawmakers break for summer

By: Melissa Daniels – July 19, 2013

As a summer heat wave hits Harrisburg, lawmakers are back in their districts until the September voting session begins.

This week, all pieces of the state budget finally reached completion as the fall session agenda begins to take shape.

And a restructuring in Gov. Tom Corbett's office dovetails with national speculation over whether the first-term Republican will – or should – give it another go in the 2014 election.

Corbett's new team

Corbett named a new chief of staff this week, and a new acting legislative secretary. Steve Aichele, who was named chief of staff last summer, will be replaced by Leslie Gromis Baker, a longtime GOP strategist.

The switch signals a new start for the Corbett administration following a failure to pass his agenda this past budget season. Baker is well known among Pennsylvania politicians, and headed up Corbett's transition team when he was first elected.

Andrew Ritter, who previously served as a deputy in Corbett's legislative office, will take over as acting legislative secretary for Chris Carusone, who is leaving the administration for private law practice.

The shakeup comes as Corbett's 2014 re-election plans are considered a "toss-up" by more and more national pundits and election watchers, like those at Governing magazine.

"Corbett's liabilities continue to mount, and there is a growing sense that he may not be able to recover," wrote the magazine's Louis Jacobson.

House of Representatives returns

The House of Representatives returned on Monday to pass the fiscal code, a bill directing state appropriations that must be passed in order to disburse the state's spending plan. Now, lawmakers head back to their districts before coming back for more voting days in September.

But summer in Harrisburg does involve the occasional hearing to tee up issues for the fall. This week, the House State Government Committee held a discussion on proposed updates to the state's Right-to-Know Law. Senate Majority Leader Dominic Pileggi, R-Delaware, sponsored a bill that could get voted to the House in September, while House members have dozens of proposals.

One topic lawmakers are likely to address in some form is whether inmates should have different rights for requesting information than other citizens.

State records show inmates are responsible for a majority of the requests processed by the Department of Corrections, and nearly a third of all appeals handled by the Office of Open Records.

PA's disability population continues to rise

The number of people in Pennsylvania collecting disability benefits has increased by more than 50 percent in just eight years, according to data from the Social Security Administration.

As of 2011, more than 390,000 Pennsylvanians are collecting monthly checks of at least \$720 through the Social Security Disability Insurance program. That's more than the entire population of Pittsburgh, the state's second-largest city.

The 50 percent increase since 2003 in Pennsylvania is outpacing the national average of 39 percent growth over the same period. The aging population of both the state and nation are partially to blame for the increasing rolls.

But some experts say the growth is due to abuse.

"It is so obviously abused and so obviously become something it was never meant to be," said Tad DeHaven, research associate with the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

Originally, disability coverage through Social Security was only for workers over age 50 and under age 64. As such, it served as a kind of pre-social security for those who could no longer work due to medical issues.

DeHaven said Congress has turned the disability program into "a back-door welfare program" for states to use.

DePasquale audits Dog Law Enforcement Office, finds weaknesses

Auditor General Eugene DePasquale voted for Pennsylvania's Dog Law when he was a state representative. As auditor general, DePasquale looked at how the office in the Department of Agriculture has implemented the law, finding plenty to bark about.

"As a result of lax enforcement, people could be exposed to dangerous dogs, consumers could be emotionally and financially affected by sick dogs from puppy mills and the dogs themselves could be physically harmed by living in unhealthy conditions," AG Eugene DePasquale said in a statement.

The audit found various ways the office was not prepared to enforce animal health regulations and questioned its use of citation and licensing funds that are meant to enforce the law.

The audit gave multiple recommendations for better management. Most involve beefing up oversight and training to ensure kennels, dog wardens and Dog Law Enforcement Office personnel comply with the law.

Samantha Krepps, press secretary for the department, called the report outdated.

“It is ridiculous for anyone to suggest the Dog Law Enforcement Office is trying to undermine the law,” Krepps said in an email to PA Independent. “The Dog Law Enforcement Office has, and will continue, to strengthen – not dilute – Pennsylvania’s Dog Law.”

Voter ID law back on trial

Pennsylvania’s controversial voter ID law is back in Commonwealth Court, as its constitutionality is tested.

Commonwealth Court Judge Bernard L. McGinley will hear the case. Testimony is expected to take the next two weeks.

If the law is upheld, Pennsylvania’s voter ID rules would be among the strictest in the country.

More than two dozen states around the country require some form of identification before voting, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Not all require a photo, the way Pennsylvania’s law does, with utility bills, registration cards or property tax statements serving as acceptable forms of identification.

Attorney General Kathleen Kane, in a statement Friday, said she believes the voter ID law is “on its face, constitutional. My concern with the Voter ID law has always been its implementation.”