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Opinion

Around the Capitol: Local reps support education funding plan

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By Lena Khzouz & Tim Powers, for Press & Guide Newspapers

State Reps. Gino Polidori(D-Dearborn), Andy Dillon (D-Redford, who represents north Dearborn Heights), Dian Slavens (D-Canton) and Douglas Geiss(D-Taylor) were among those who voted to protect Michigan's schools from further budget cuts and give them the time they need to plan for the upcoming school year, according to the officials.

State Sen. Irma Clark-Coleman (D-Detroit, who represents Dearborn) also voted for the budget

The plan was passed by the House and Senate and Gov. Jennifer Granholm signed it — the state school aid budget bill for the 2011 fiscal year — Friday, saying she was honoring her pledge to protect K-12 funding.

It increases funding to schools by \$11 per pupil, reducing cuts made last year; boosts funding for the Great Start School Readiness Program to \$98.6 million; protects \$6 million for the Early Childhood Investment Corp.; and invests \$5 million for the Great Parents Great Start Program.

"In today's competitive global economy, we simply cannot afford to cut corners when it comes to giving our kids a top-notch education," said Geiss, a member of the House Education Committee.

"We must invest in our children to prepare them to be the work force of tomorrow, which comes down to making sure that our schools have the resources to teach Michigan's kids. Getting the job done for schools now — rather than later — will help protect our kids from the fallout of Lansing's broken system."

The lawmakers also vowed to keep protecting the school aid fund from being raided for other uses.

"Passing this budget today is good news for our schools and our kids," Polidori said. "However, there is still more work to be done to make sure that Michigan's kids can get the quality education they deserve.

"Michigan's schools are vital to turning our state around, and they must be protected. I will fight any attempt to balance the budget on the backs of our kids."

House Speaker Dillon also voted for the plan.

"I'm pleased to see both sides of the aisle come together and recognize that our children's education is a major factor in Michigan's success in the 21st century economy," Dillon said. "Our schools need to be able to prepare our kids to compete against workers not just from around the nation, but from around the world. Passing the School Aid Budget by July 1 enables our schools to plan for the upcoming school year so they can provide our kids with the best education possible."

Sen. Clark-Coleman, who is a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, said, "this budget at least allows our schools to start their fiscal year knowing how much money they actually have to spend on students and in the classroom. "Teachers and administrators can now focus more on academics instead of wondering what the Legislature will do with their budget."

Gov. Granholm was happy she could fulfill her promise not to cut school aid. "I promised not to sign any school aid bill for the 2011 fiscal year that cut funding for K-12 schools," she said. "The completion of the school aid budget, together with the earlier enactment of school employee retirement reform legislation, provides schools with the financial certainty they need to adjust their budgets while still early in the school fiscal year."

Bill moving forward to assist with construction of new bridge to Canada

Following weeks of extensive testimony in the Senate Transportation Committee, state Sen. Raymond Basham (D-Taylor) said he believes members are nearing a vote on a bill to push a new bridge over the Detroit River.

Basham said he is looking forward to passing the bill out of the committee and ultimately the full Senate.

HB 4961 would authorize the state to proceed with public private partnerships for transportation infrastructure projects and to finance them with tolls.

It is the enabling legislation for the proposed Detroit River International Crossing bridge.

Basham, a proponent of the DRIC, argues that another bridge between the United States and Canada is the single most important infrastructure project Michigan will invest in and has the potential to fuel a significant economic expansion in the state.

The proposed bridge would be south of the Ambassador Bridge, which connects Detroit and Windsor, Ontario.

Studies show that truck traffic is expected to increase by 128 percent through this corridor, but it does not currently have the capacity to meet the demand. Truck traffic already has increased by more than 20 percent this year.

According to Basham, if additional capacity is not provided at the Detroit crossings, it is expected that Michigan will lose more than 3,200 jobs in Detroit and Wayne County, and an additional 12,700 jobs in the rest of the state by 2035.

Basham added that the total estimated cost of not building the DRIC bridge is more than \$4.9 billion.

The DRIC bridge is projected to create 10,000 construction jobs and 30,000 direct and indirect long-term jobs associated with the growth in commerce it will accommodate.

With the passage of HB 4961 the crossing can receive its presidential permit, allowing the state to then proceed with construction.

School-based health centers get help

U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.) announced that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has started accepting applications for new equipment in school-based health centers.

A total of \$50 million in national grants will be offered through the School-Based Health Center Capitol Program—a provision authored by Stabenow as a part of the Affordable Care Act. The program is expected to improve the quality of health services available to students.

“This program will allow these clinics to purchase and upgrade equipment for more efficient, quality care,” Stabenow said. “I encourage schools to apply as soon as possible to take advantage of this program.”

School-based health centers play a major role in providing basic services for students who seek medical attention.

These grants will be used to purchase equipment to improve the services available for students with acute and chronic illnesses as well as increase students’ access to quality care.

The Health Resources and Services Administration, an agency of HHS, will administer these grants. HRSA expects to award an estimated 1,000 grants in fiscal year 2010 that can be used to purchase equipment for school-based health centers.

For more information regarding these grants and how to apply, visit www.grants.gov.

Wall Street reform passed in Washington

U.S. Rep. John Dingell (D-Dearborn) made remarks after the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act.

This bill would end the era of abuses by “too big to fail” banks that have cost the American people 8 million jobs and \$17 trillion in retirement savings and net worth.

Dingell said legislators are sending a message to the financial services industry: no more bailouts. He added that they are telling Wall Street that it can no longer look to the American taxpayers or Congress to cover its bad bets.

AARP applauds House passage of financial reform

By passing the “Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act,” Members voted to protect consumers and investors from abusive practices and reduce the vulnerability of the financial system, statement from AARP.

AARP sent a letter to each House office advising them that the Association designated the June 30 vote as an “AARP Key Vote.” AARP will report back to its members and the public how each Representative votes on this legislation.

AARP noted Dingell, Rep. John Conyers, Rep. Dale Kildee, Rep. Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick, Rep. Sander Levin, Rep. Gary Peters, Rep. Mark Schauer and Rep. Bart Stupak from Michigan all voted for the bill.

Michigan House members voting no were: Rep. David Camp, Rep. Vernon Ehlers, Rep. Peter Hoekstra, Rep. Candice Miller, Rep. Mike Rogers and Rep. Fred Upton.

According to the AARP statement, the group of older Americans supports this legislation because it will establish a watchdog that will protect Americans from getting a mortgage or credit card that has hidden fees that cause their bills to skyrocket; ensure Americans get the clear, accurate information they need to shop for mortgages, credit cards and other financial products; and crackdown on investment scams targeted at older Americans.

“Over the last three years, older Americans have lost billions of hard earned dollars due to the failure of an outdated and compromised financial regulatory system,” said Jacqueline Morrison, AARP Michigan interim state director. “The failures that led to this crisis require bold action to restore responsibility, accountability and consumer confidence in our financial system, and this bill will protect Americans’ money and help stabilize our economy.”

“AARP polling shows that Americans age 50+, regardless of party affiliation, want Congress to hold financial institutions accountable,” said Morrison. “This legislation takes critical steps to ensure consumers know what they’re buying and where to find help should they get scammed.”

New carp sighting alarms U.S. Sen. Levin

U.S. Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.) said the discovery of Asian carp in the upper reaches of the Wabash River in Indiana, near the Great Lakes Basin, is another alarm calling lawmakers to address the threat.

He urged the Army Corps of Engineers to take steps to stop the threat and repeated his call for immediate action to address a recent discovery of adult Asian carp in Lake Calumet in Illinois.

On June 29, 47 members of Congress — 14 senators and 33 representatives — signed a letter to President Barack Obama calling on the administration to take “urgent steps to protect the Great Lakes” from the serious threat of Asian carp. Levin, co-chairman of the Senate Great Lakes Task Force, led the bipartisan, bicameral letter.

Included in the letter is the fact that on June 22, the first Asian carp was captured in the Chicago area waterway system above the electric barriers.

“In addition to increasing efforts to find and remove existing carp, we urge you to speed up efforts to immediately strengthen the barrier and implement all other measures necessary to stop the carp from migrating into the Great Lakes, including pursuing an aggressive strategy for permanent hydrologic separation,” part of the letter says.

On June 30, Stabenow and U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) introduced legislation in the Senate and U.S. Rep. Dave Camp (R-Mich.) introduced legislation in the House to permanently prevent the carp and other invasive species from entering the Great Lakes.

The “Permanent Prevention of Asian Carp Act” would require the Army Corps of Engineers to conduct and expedite a study detailing engineering options in order to determine the best way to permanently separate the Mississippi River Basin from Lake Michigan.

Great Lake Act passed by Congressional committee

Also on June 30, the U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works approved the Great Lakes Ecosystem Protection Act of 2010, which was introduced in March by Levin and U.S. Sen. George Voinovich (R-Ohio).

The act includes the following provisions: authorize the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, authorize a new two-tiered advisory group to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency–Great Lakes Leadership Council and Great Lakes Management Committee, reauthorize the Great Lakes National Program Office, reauthorize the Great Lakes Legacy Program and authorize the federal Interagency Task Force.

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