

Olympia Update No. 2 • February 8, 2008
House Appropriations Subcommittee Budget

Legislators wait for revenue forecast

Budget discussions in Olympia are nearly frozen as legislators try to dig out from an avalanche of poor national economic news. There's a storm of speculation in Olympia that the Feb. 15 state revenue forecast may leave the 2008 Legislature with \$150 million to \$200 million less to spend in the upcoming biennium. These cold, negative winds blow against strong commitments from the governor for a large ending fund balance to protect against a worsening economy and legislators' appetite for some election-year budget enhancements.

The first milestone for the 60-day legislative session is Friday, when policy bills in the original house must be passed out of committee or die under legislative rules. WSU has identified many bills that could impact the university; they are listed at the WSU Legislative Information web site, www.olympia.wsu.edu under "Bill Status." Summaries and positions on the bills are provided as well as links to bill language and legislative staff analysis.

A bill to enable collective bargaining to WSU graduate teaching assistants and research assistants at WSU (HB 2963) has already cleared the first hurdle, passed by the House Commerce & Labor Committee to the House Appropriations Committee. WSU does not oppose enabling legislation sought by the UAW for graduate student employees but requests amendments that would clarify that academic issues cannot be bargained and that undergraduate students cannot be included in the bargaining units. Concerns about the bill have been expressed by Nick Lovrich on behalf of the WSU Faculty Senate and Chris Reigelsperger, representing the Associated Students of Washington State University. But the bill is a priority for the Washington State Labor Council and the UAW is opposing any amendments. A Senate committee is expected to pass the same bill today (SB 6737.)

While running short on money to spend, the Legislature has been working with budget policy. Bills that would restructure how WSU's capital construction projects are prioritized (Substitute House Bill 3329) and a new operating budget proposal to enter into "performance contracts" with institutions are moving in the Legislature (House Bill 2641.)

Legislation supported by the WSU Faculty Senate to add a faculty member as the Eleventh member of the Board of Regents received hearings in both houses but appears to be in trouble (SB 6390 and HB 2948.) WSU was neutral on the proposal.

The House Appropriations-Education Subcommittee chaired by Rep. Kathy Haigh has released a budget outline for Washington State University based largely on the spending level recommended by Gov. Christine Gregoire “as was requested by the Appropriations leadership.” The House proposal contained \$1.6 million in funding to correct errors in the current budget for WSU but contained no major funding enhancements.

Students have been successful in securing some one-time funding for child care in the subcommittee budget. It may result in \$180,000 for WSU. There were small appropriations for a campus safety mental health counselor (\$77,000), funding for a deaf education program at WSU Vancouver (\$125,000), a land use study by the WSU-UW Ruckelshaus Center (\$175,000) and two new scholarships in veterinary medicine targeted to students who work with large animals (\$40,000.)

Nevertheless, there remains significant legislative support for WSU budget requests, if state revenues permit them to be considered.

Emerging Global Animal Health & Agriculture Package Featured at Senate Hearing

WSU’s \$3.85 million request received an hour-long hearing before the Senate Agriculture and Rural Economic Development Committee. Speaking at the hearing were President Elson Floyd, two WSU deans, and a number of supporters from the agriculture industry. The budget request has been identified as a priority of the “Agriculture Summit,” a coalition of the state’s agricultural organizations, and is on the informal list of agricultural priorities that has been identified by House leadership. Senate Ways and Means Chair Margarita Prentice urged fellow senators to closely evaluate the proposal following a hearing on WSU issues in front of her committee. The proposal, strongly supported by the Washington State Veterinary Medical Association, creates a new WSU School of Global Animal Health to confront the dangers of disease transmission from animals to humans, such as bird flu. The proposal also deals with pressing issues such as e-coli, honey bee colony collapse, and other issues that threaten the food supply.

Administrative & Student Core Computer Systems Study. Key legislators continue to take an interest in a \$1 million proposal to study the replacement of WSU’s aging core computer systems for administration and direct student support. The issue has been complicated by the desire of some legislators to centralize much of the computing for higher education and all state agencies. WSU has offered to cooperate on centralization studies but urges study of its project move ahead.

There’s been considerable conversation about campus safety issues. Funding was requested by WSU and all agencies for additional safety initiatives as a result of lessons learned from Virginia Tech’s 2007 tragedy. The governor provided \$1.8 million for one-time equipment expenses at WSU. The governor’s proposal allows the first phase of the installation of internal public address warning systems within buildings and remote electronic locking systems. The House and Senate have not taken a position on those recommendations but the House subcommittee did indicate a willingness for some limited investments in employees (permanent funding) that the governor would not consider. The House subcommittee provided funding for a mental health counselor at WSU. WSU has identified funding for an emergency management coordinator, a threat assessment coordinator, and three additional police officers as its highest priority.

Members of the Senate Higher Education Committee have sent out a joint letter to the Ways and Means Committee, urging restoration of funding for graduate student programs. In the only cut to higher education this biennium, the Legislature reduced funding at UW and WSU for what they termed a “subsidy” for graduate programs. The research institutions have argued it will damage instructional program for all students, graduate and undergraduate.

The Washington Veterinary Medical Association has led efforts to secure \$7.4 million in design funding for a new Veterinary Medical Research building in Pullman. Most of the proposed 128,000-square foot Pullman laboratory facility will provide state-of-the-art space to support interdisciplinary research and graduate education programs located in outmoded buildings that are more than a half century old.

A number of University of Washington issues are dominating higher education discussion at the Legislature. Controversial proposals for using public funding for a new Husky Stadium and establishing an \$800 million branch campus in the Everett area are major discussion topics. Washington State University regards these as matters between UW and the Legislature this year and has not participated in legislative debate. WSU continues to work under the policy that stadiums must be built with private funds and that UW must lead policy on whether a new North Puget Sound campus should be established.

Olympia Update is produced for persons interested in state government developments affecting Washington State University. For more information, go to www.olympia.wsu.edu. Contacts: Larry Ganders, Assistant to the President, 360-956-2165. From WSU campuses, dial 8-2165. If you wish to subscribe to Olympia Update directly by email, send a completely blank message from your e-mail account (no signatures or footers please) to: subscribe-olympia_update@listserv.energy.wsu.edu