

SESSION
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Wheeler said his Senate Bill 280 — which, if approved by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, would result in Level II, Level III and Level IV trauma centers in Kentucky, most of which are in rural areas, receiving the same Medicaid and Medicare reimbursement rates as university hospitals — was a major win.

Wheeler said that he didn't expect to sponsor a bill which would result in such an expansion of Medicaid and Medicare spending, but that the benefits to the commonwealth and Eastern Kentucky could be great.

"Sometimes you have to get outside your comfort zone and get people together in a room," he said. "I can't speak highly enough of (Pikeville Medical Center President, CEO and Board Chairman Donovan Blackburn) and how he participated in that."

Even the University of Kentucky, which initially opposed the plan, eventually became a supporter.

"I'll give them credit, I think toward the end they were very much a good faith collaborator," he said.

The measure could have a big impact, he said.

"That'll bring in potentially hundreds of millions of dollars in additional federal monies into Kentucky without actually placing any additional liability onto the general fund," he said.

Budget contains funds for Pike, Eastern Kentucky

One of the biggest topics of discussion and work during the session was Kentucky's two-year budget, which was approved.

State Rep. John Blanton, R-Salyersville, said the budget is proof that the majority party's plans are working.

"I think the budget showed that all of our restraint over the last seven years on how we spent money opened us to the ability to fund a lot of one-time cost projects, which is good for our district

and good for our commonwealth," Blanton said.

Road projects and projects overall in Eastern Kentucky are the big wins, Blanton said.

"When you look at the road projects, my district ended up with over \$100 million in funding over the next two years," he said. "With projects in general ... you're looking at over \$50 million in projects alone."

Blanton also pointed to some aspects of the budget which affect the entire commonwealth as positives, including an increase in the Support Education Excellence in Kentucky funding, the primary mechanism by which the state funds public schools.

"The historic amount of funding in our SEEK funding and transportation funding for schools is a big win," he said. "There were some things that I wish had been in there that weren't, particularly raises for teachers specifically."

However, Blanton said that some of the superintendents have told him they should be able to fund raises with the allocations as approved.

Blanton said he also wanted cost of living increases or a 13th check for state retirees, but those possibilities weren't approved as part of the budget.

Keeping the state's rainy day fund intact, despite calls to use it to fund even more projects, he said, is integral.

"We're trying to keep a 45-day reserve," he said. "We can go back to 2008 when that situation arose where they literally didn't have funding to operate the state."

Having that money on-hand, he said, has already proven to be a smart strategy, when the legislature was able to respond quickly with \$212 million in funding for flood response following the Eastern Kentucky flooding in 2022.

"By having that money, we're able to come in and immediately send funding into these disaster areas," he said. "Whereas if we don't have that money sitting there, we can't do that."

Some of the proposed projects which weren't funded, Blanton said, were projects which would have required the legislature to commit reoccurring funding for.

"We're on target, meeting our goals, so that if goes well, unless something just horribly goes wrong, by the end of this fiscal year ... we're on pace to meet the targets to reduce the state income tax by another half percent down to 3.5 percent," he said.

Success tempered with desire to do more

While 95th Dist. state Rep. Ashley Tackett Laferty, the region's sole Democrat in the legislature, said she sees many positives in the approved spending plan but believes more should have been done, especially on teacher pay.

"Those bills contained a lot of good things for Eastern Kentucky," she said, pointing to road projects and a 3 percent raise for state employees in each fiscal year and public pensions being fully funded.

She said another success is the fact that 100 percent of coal severance will be returned to coal counties after debt service is paid.

Laferty said the Kentucky Mountain Regional Recreation Authority will receive \$1 million each year to advance the First Frontier Appalachian Trails, an ATV trail system intended to connect 12 counties. A new marina at Jenny Wiley State is also being funded in the budget.

Laferty said the legislature also increased funding to the veterans service organizations' burial honors program, which currently makes a \$60 per funeral stipend available to veteran service organizations for performing honors at veterans' funerals.

Laferty said the Disabled American Veterans chapter at Minnie brought the issue to her attention and she hopes that the increased funding will ultimately be used to increase the stipend, which has been the same for many years.

"I would hope that they wouldn't set it any lower than \$100," she said.

While Laferty said she was glad to see the increase to the SEEK funding allocations and to school districts for transportation, the increase still doesn't cover the cost districts incur to transport students.

In addition, she said, she's glad to see funding for school resource officers.

"Unfortunately, it's my understanding that school districts can spend up to \$20,000 per school," she said.

Education spending, she said, is good, but more should have been done.

"Overall, while I'm happy to see that increase in educational investments, my biggest disappointment is that this budget still fails to give our teachers and all those working in education a raise across the board," she said. "Since I've been in Frankfort, raises have been given to lots of deserving folks — state troopers, state workers, correctional officers, social workers, just to name a few. This year, I had really hoped to finally see our public education employees receive the raises they deserve. Unfortunately this budget only encourages local districts to give raises based upon the increased funds they'll be receiving in the next two years."

SEEK increase only part of education funding

97th Dist. state Rep. Bobby McCool, R-Van Lear, speaking at an event in Johnson County April 24, said he is pleased with the level of education funding.

McCool said that education funding and support for public education (which continues to make up the majority of the state's budget) continue to be of the utmost importance to the legislature, evidenced by the SEEK increase, continued full-day kindergarten funding and funding for transportation.

"I think we've done very well with it this session. As already mentioned, we've raised the



Photo courtesy LRC Public Information
Sen. Phillip Wheeler, R-Pikeville, speaks on Senate Bill 6, an act related to postsecondary institutions, on the Senate floor on Feb. 13.



Photo courtesy LRC Public Information
Rep. Ashley Tackett Laferty, D-Martin, left, and Rep. John Blanton, R-Salyersville, look over changes made to Senate Bill 91, an act related to identity documents, during the House Committee on Appropriations and Revenue meeting April 15.

SEEK dollars quite a bit, because it needed to be raised," McCool said. "The kindergarten as well, we've paid for that and also the bussing. We've picked up 90 percent the first year and 100-percent the next year and that gives the schools money to do other things."

Other education (and childcare) funding, McCool said, included:

- \$3.5 million for Datasam, which McCool said was an important initiative for rural areas;
- \$4.8 million each fiscal year for teacher recruitment student loan forgiveness programs;
- \$2.6 million over two years for teacher scholarship programs;
- \$7.3 million over two years for a student-teacher stipend;
- \$500 million for unfunded liabilities for Kentucky state employees;
- Increases in Kentucky Teacher Retirement System funding of \$159.2 million for fiscal year 2025 and \$302.1 million for fiscal year 2026;
- \$11 million for KTRS health insurance in FY2025 and an additional \$6.5 million for FY2026;
- \$10.7 million over two years to equalize the recallable nickel tax at 100 percent;
- \$2 million each year to support school safety;
- \$8 million over two years to establish additional Family Resources and Youth Services Centers;
- School childcare funding of \$16.5 million in FY2025 and \$18 million in FY2026;
- \$2 million each year for the employee childcare assistance partnership;
- An additional \$56

million over two years to maintain Childcare Assistance Program reimbursements to childcare providers for families at the 80th percentile of the market rate survey; and

• \$17.8 million over two years to support CCAP initiatives such as a six-month transition for families no longer eligible for CCAP.

McCool was complimentary of Wheeler's work in the session and said he did not want to take any individual credit for what was done, stating that collaboration was the key to any successes he was involved in, be that collaboration between him and Wheeler, or the large network of community, and business-minded individuals in the area that give him a guidepost for what to pursue for the area.

"I think we've done very well, but it's not something that I've done individually, and you can't do it individually. You have to build rapport, and have a great senator, as I do, to help you on the other end of the house," McCool said. "We, from the legislators, extend our heartfelt gratitude to each and every one of you for your unwavering support. Your commitment and dedication have been instrumental in driving positive change and progress in our community. Together, we have achieved so much and we look forward to continuing this journey towards a brighter future for all. Thank you for believing in us and standing by our sides."

Editor's note: Paintsville Herald News Editor Waylon Whitson contributed to this report.

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