

Last Week at the Capitol

FRANKFORT — The Kentucky General Assembly reconvened in Frankfort this week for Part II of the 2025 legislative session, and lawmakers were eager to begin moving bills on health care, gubernatorial pardons and public safety.

Close to 20 bills have passed out of committee so far, and a handful have cleared at least one chamber.

But no measure has advanced with more momentum than House Bill 1, the latest step in a multi-year effort to gradually reduce and eliminate Kentucky's income tax.

The legislation was resting close to the finish line when lawmakers concluded the first part of the session in January.

The Senate wasted no time Tuesday passing the bill off the chamber floor and sending it to the governor's desk.

HB 1 will cut Kentucky's income tax rate from 4% to 3.5% beginning next year. The measure has carried bipartisan support this session even as lawmakers in both chambers have sparred over the impact of tax cuts.

The governor signed the bill on Thursday, making it the first bill to become law in 2025.

The Senate was also moving deliberately this week on Senate Bill 17, which seeks to create a statutory and regulatory framework to operate freestanding birthing centers in Kentucky.

Different versions of the bill have been discussed for years as supporters have sought to find common ground among a wide gamut of stakeholders.

The latest proposal appears to be advancing with more support. It won passage in the Senate Health Services Committee on Wednesday and advanced off the Senate floor Friday with a 34-0 vote and three pass votes.

Another measure clearing the Senate was Senate Bill 126, which proposes to amend the state constitution and limit the governor's ability to grant pardons or commutations either just before an election or in the final months before they leave office.

SB 126 advanced out of the Senate State and Local Government Committee on Wednesday and breezed off the Senate floor Friday with a near-unanimous vote.

If the bill wins final passage this year, Kentucky voters would still need to ratify the amendment before it could take effect.

Meanwhile in the House, a bill that seeks to prevent choking deaths in schools took an early step after the mother of 8-year-old Landon McCubbins provided moving testimony to the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee.

Landon died at school in 2022 while choking on a bouncy ball, and House Bill 44 would clear the way for schools to deploy anti-choking devices in such cases after other attempts to save a student's life have failed.

It won committee approval Wednesday and now heads to the full House.

Also on Wednesday, the Senate Transportation Committee moved a bill that would levy a new \$200 fee against "super speeders," a proposed term for those convicted of driving more than 25 miles per hour over the speed limit on a state highway.

Revenue from the legislation — Senate Bill 57 — would help fund Kentucky's emergency trauma network.

Sexual extortion was another issue to capture attention this week after the Senate Judiciary Committee heard stirring testimony Thursday on Senate Bill 73. The measure seeks to make sexual extortion a felony in Kentucky and provide victims with more legal remedies.

Committee members voted 7-0 to send the bill to the full Senate.

Twenty-two days remain in this year's short, 30-day session, and lawmakers are scheduled to reconvene on Tuesday in the Old State Capitol building in downtown Frankfort. The Old Capitol served as the center of state government from 1830 to 1910, and in a nod to legislative history, the General Assembly typically conducts floor proceedings in the building once each session.

As always, Kentuckians can track the action through the Legislative Record webpage, which allows users to read bills and follow their progression through the chambers. Citizens can also share their views on issues with lawmakers by calling the General Assembly's toll-free message line at 1-800-372-7181.

How much would that bill cost? Beshear provides a price list.

By LIAM NIEMEYER
The Kentucky Lantern

Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear's office this week launched a webpage displaying projected price tags for bills before the legislature — known as fiscal notes — which he touted as a step toward transparency.

The Democrat in a Thursday press conference said fiscal notes in recent sessions have not been made public on the legislature's website or sometimes even shared with lawmakers.

"The least that we can do for transparency is when we're going to put one of these together that we post it so that the people of the commonwealth, so that journalists, so that other legislators can see the approximation of what a bill costs that we've sent either to the [committee] chair or to leadership or to others," Beshear said.

Any lawmaker may ask for such a fiscal impact statement, and the fiscal impact of a bill has traditionally been estimated by nonpartisan Legislative Research Commission (LRC) staff in consultation with the executive branch agency that would be responsible for implementing the new law. These statements give a general idea of how much money a piece of legislation would take to implement.

Last year, the governor refused to implement a number of laws passed by the GOP-controlled legislature because he said the legislature didn't properly fund them, something legislative leaders pushed back on. Some of those laws in question didn't have fiscal notes publicly attached to them. Kentucky Public Radio reported fiscal notes for many bills haven't been made public, deemed "confidential" by a bill sponsor and hidden from public view.

"I think this can hopefully help the General Assembly on the budgeting side, making sure that if we're going to pass a bill, that we have an appropriation where we the executive branch can then execute that law," Beshear said.

The webpage — called "2025 Facts & Fiscal Notes" — as of Thursday lists more than two dozen bills and corresponding cost estimates, ranging from legislation that would remove a state requirement that water utilities add fluoride to drinking water — estimated to cost \$19.7 million to \$59.1 million for health care costs incurred from more dental work needed — to a bill that would establish an Office of Outdoor Recreation Industry, estimated to cost \$810,000.

At least some bills on the governor's webpage lack fiscal impact statements on the legislature's website.

It's unclear if the language and estimates on Beshear's webpage are identical to the fiscal notes usually created in collaboration between the LRC and executive branch. Mike Wynn, the public information officer for the LRC, who wasn't immediately aware of the webpage, told the Lantern LRC staff members would have to compare the cost estimates on the webpage with fiscal notes in their possession.

Kentucky Public Radio previously reported members of both parties have criticized the notion of passing laws with "confidential" fiscal notes — a practice that was unknown to all but three of 30-plus lawmakers interviewed by the public radio network last year. Kentucky is in a minority of states where the legislature does not require a fiscal note on bills that would impact the budget, public radio reported.

Rep. Savannah Maddox, R-Dry Ridge, is sponsoring a bill this session that would require legislation that makes it to the floor of a legislative chamber to have a publicly available fiscal note attached.

Maddox told the Lantern, having not seen the webpage herself as of Thursday afternoon, that she was supportive of the governor making fiscal notes publicly available. But she said she still sees a need to pass her bill given future gubernatorial administrations may act differently.

"I think that transparency is a bipartisan issue," Maddox said. "If we went to the grocery store and there weren't price tags on any of the items and then we got to the checkout counter...we'd be pretty surprised by the bill. But here, we're expected to take votes on legislation without knowing how much that legislation would cost taxpayers."

Senate President Robert Stivers, R-Manchester, has previously defended the "confidential" fiscal note process in comments made to Kentucky Public Radio, arguing that publicly available fiscal notes can be "quicksand" for bills prioritized by leadership, particularly toward the end of a legislative session.

Stivers in a Thursday interview questioned the validity of some fiscal notes produced in part by the executive branch, saying their interpretation of state statute in some cases makes lawmakers question whether a fiscal note is "legitimate."

He also pointed to a Kentucky Department of Corrections memo that Beshear pulled creating a process for transgender inmates to request gender-affirming care, arguing the governor was instituting policies "without coming to us asking for and telling us what the fiscal implications would be."

"He picks and chooses within the appropriations units what he is deciding to fund instead of the policy that we send him, which is quite violative of our constitutional duties," Stivers said.

Crystal Staley, a spokesperson for Beshear, in an emailed statement said it was "concerning that any legislator would respond negatively to the governor providing transparency to the people of Kentucky about how much of their tax money is needed to implement a bill."

"As the governor has said during his Team Kentucky updates — law-

makers would pass bills without the necessary information to know how much it would cost. The governor's action allows everyone to see the associated cost and should promote better government," Staley said.

When asked whether the cost estimates on the website are identical to the fiscal notes normally created in collaboration between the executive branch and the LRC, Staley said the same information on the webpage is sent to the LRC.

Amye Bensenhaver, the co-director of the open government advocacy nonprofit Kentucky Open Government Coalition, who has previously criticized "confidential" fiscal notes, told the Lantern the move appears to be a way for Beshear to get out ahead of a politically contentious issue of having bills passed by legislature that the executive branch says it doesn't have sufficient funds to implement.

"The public (and certainly every lawmaker) should have access to fiscal notes prepared by [the] LRC to make informed decisions about a bill," Bensenhaver said in a text message.

kentuckylantern.com

How to contact your elected officials:

U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell 241 E. Main Street, Rm. 102 Bowling Green, KY 42101 270-781-167	U.S. Rep. Brett Guthrie 996 Wilkinson Trace, Suite B2 Bowling Green, KY 42103 270-842-9896	State Sen. Craig Richardson 702 Capital Ave., Annex Room 228 Frankfort, KY 40601 502-564-8100	Muhlenberg County Fiscal Court Judge/Executive Mack McGehee P.O. Box 137 Greenville, KY 42345 270-338-2520
U.S. Sen. Rand Paul 1029 State Street Bowling Green, KY 42101 270-782-8303	Gov. Andy Beshear 700 Capitol Ave., Suite 100 Frankfort, KY 40601 502-564-2611	State Rep. Rebecca Raymer 702 Capital Ave., Annex Room 329G Frankfort, KY 40601 502-564-8100	

LEADER-NEWS

Serving Muhlenberg County Since 1912

1730 W. Everly Brothers Blvd. - P.O. Box 471
Central City, KY 42330
270-754-3000

Hours: Monday and Tuesday 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Wednesday through Friday 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

VISIT US ONLINE
www.ky-leadernews.com

EDITOR -
ADVERTISING - Amanda James
CIRCULATION - Lisa Sullivan
PLANT MANAGER - Bill Hinton

CORRECTIONS
We strive for accuracy.
To suggest a correction or clarification, email
editor@ky-leadernews.com

CONTACT THE NEWSROOM
to submit or suggest a news story or photo.
Email editor@ky-leadernews.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR
We welcome letters to the editor. All letters must be signed with a phone number for verification, not publication. Letters are subject to editing for space. Letters containing profanity, knowingly inaccurate information or that are libelous in nature will not be published. The opinion of the writer does not reflect that of the Leader-News.

DEADLINES
Advertising, Legal Notices, Obituaries and Classifieds should be sent by 4 p.m. Mondays.

Published every Tuesday by the Andy Anderson Corporation
Periodical Postage Paid at Greenville, KY 42345
USPS 229-260

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: Leader-News, P.O. Box 138 Greenville, KY 42345

ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES
In Muhlenberg County - \$27.50 (tax included)
Elsewhere in Kentucky - \$29.70 (tax included)
Outside Kentucky - \$32
We accept MasterCard, Visa and Discover

MEMBER

KPA
KENTUCKY PRESS
ASSOCIATION

ISWNE
THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY
of WEEKLY NEWSPAPER EDITORS