

# Last Week at the Capitol

**F R A N K F O R T** — High-profile bills on religious freedom, college athletics and fluoride were all on the move this week as lawmakers passed a wave of bills out of committee and off the chamber floors in preparation for a busy two weeks ahead.

Friday marked day 20 of this year's short, 30-day session, leaving just eight days on the calendar before the general assembly is scheduled to break for the veto recess. Legislators will need to finalize bills by March 14 if they want a chance to override potential vetoes from the governor.

The looming deadline prompted swift action in committee and long afternoons in the chambers throughout the week.

The House met for more than four hours Wednesday to clear a slate of 23 bills, and lawmakers passed another 16 off the floor Thursday. Measures on fluoride and workplace conditions proved especially contentious during the proceedings.

House Bill 16 would make water fluoridation programs optional for the governing bodies of local water providers, and lawmakers clashed over the impact of fluoride on both dental and internal health before passing the measure 68-29.

The focus then pivoted to differences over occupational safety.

House Bill 398 aims to align Kentucky's workplace safety and health regulations with federal rules. It also calls for limits on Kentucky policies so that they are no more stringent than those on the federal level.

Supporters said the bill would streamline regulations and make it easier for businesses to locate in Kentucky. However, opponents raised concerns that it would compromise the safety of workers and leave Kentucky subject to uncertainties on the federal level.

The bill passed 62-33 and now heads to the Senate.

For its part, the upper chamber turned Wednesday to a floor debate over religious liberty and discrimination.

Senate Bill 60 seeks to reinforce religious liberty protections in Kentucky and clear the way for individuals to sue the government for violations of religious freedom.

Critics cited concerns that some might use religious protections to justify discrimination. But supporters said the bill

is needed to reinforce founding principles and protect religious exercise. The measure cleared the Senate with a 29-7 vote on Wednesday.

On Thursday, the spotlight shifted to the Senate Education Committee thanks in part to an appearance by Mitch Barnhart, athletics director at the University of Kentucky, and Josh Heird, director of athletics at the University of Louisville.

Both testified in support of Senate Bill 3, which would update Kentucky's name, image and likeness law for college athletes. The proposed changes would align Kentucky's law — adopted in 2022 — with national standards, particularly in the aftermath of the House v. NCAA court case.

A pending settlement in the case could result in universities providing direct compensation to student athletes, and advocates for the bill said Kentucky needs to respond to the evolving landscape. The committee passed the measure Thursday.

Later in the day, lawmakers also took action on a priority measure designed to boost Kentucky's growing film industry.

Senate Bill 1 would establish the Kentucky Film Office to administer the state's film incentive program, help market the state to the film industry and develop workforce training. It received a nod from the Senate Economic Development, Tourism and Labor Committee on Thursday.

Many other measures are edging closer to passage in the legislature. Here is a look at some of the other bills on the move:

• **Dyslexia Interventions** — House Bill 272 would require local boards of education to develop a policy for identifying and assisting students in kindergarten through third grade who have dyslexia. It also calls on the state Department of Education to collect data and annually review and update its guidance on reading and writing difficulties. The measure cleared the House floor on Tuesday.

• **Elections Security** — House Bill 455 would establish the Office of Election Investigations and Security in the Kentucky Attorney General's Office. The agency would review and investigate alleged violations of state election law. The House advanced the bill Tuesday.

• **Manufactured Hous-**

**ing** — House Bill 160 would prohibit local governments from adopting or enforcing zoning regulations that treat manufactured homes differently from site-built homes in single family residential zones. The manufactured homes would still need to meet strict standards for size, age and foundation. The measure won support from the House on Tuesday.

• **Moments of Silence in Schools** — Senate Bill 19 would require public schools to hold a moment of silence and reflection for students at the start of the school day. The Senate passed the measure Tuesday.

• **KEES Scholarships** — Senate Bill 83 would expand the Kentucky Educational Excellence Scholarship program to provide funds for homeschooled students based on their ACT scores. The legislation cleared a Senate floor vote on Tuesday.

• **Childhood Hearing Loss** — Senate Bill 93 would require all health benefit plans to provide coverage for hearing aids and related services for children with hearing loss. The Senate Health Services Committee voted to advance the bill Wednesday.

• **Cell Phones in Schools** — House Bill 208 calls on school districts to establish a policy for limiting the use of cell phones during the school day with some exceptions for emergencies and instructional purposes. The bill also calls for statewide regulations that would block access to social media sites on school computers. The House Primary and Secondary Education Committee gave the bill a green light Wednesday.

• **Financial Literacy** — House Bill 342 would require high school students to earn one credit in a financial literacy course before graduation. The bill received a nod from the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee on Wednesday.

• **School Bus Cameras** — Senate Bill 38 would allow school districts to install camera systems on school buses to help combat stop arm violations. A portion of the fines from violations would be transferred to school districts to help cover the cost of the cameras. The Senate Transportation Committee advanced the legislation Wednesday.

• **Squatting** — House Bill 10 seeks to crack down on squatting, providing

a more concrete procedure for property owners and law enforcement to quickly remove unauthorized occupants from private property. It would also spell out criminal penalties for squatters who damage property. The House Judiciary Committee voted in favor of the bill Wednesday.

• **Coercive Control** — House Bill 96 would expand domestic abuse laws to include coercive control and allow victims to seek emergency protective orders based on patterns of coercive behaviors. The measure won support from the House Judiciary Committee on Wednesday.

• **Interfering with a Legislative Proceeding** — House Bill 399 would create criminal penalties, ranging from a class B misdemeanor to the class D felony, for interfering with a legislative proceeding if the intent is to prevent the general assembly from conducting business. The House Judiciary Committee passed the bill Wednesday.

• **Street Racing** — House Bill 465 aims to curb illegal street racing with tougher penalties for offenders. Violations would result in a \$1,000 fine for the first offense and a \$2,000 fine for subsequent offenses. Violators could also have their car seized, and for a second offense, spend up to 30 days in jail. The House Judiciary Committee advanced the bill Wednesday.

• **Kindergarten Readiness** — House Bill 240 would require schools to administer a reading assessment to kindergarten students within the final 14 days of the academic year. Students who fail to meet grade-level benchmarks and standards would likely need to repeat kindergarten under the proposal. The legislation won support on the House floor Wednesday.

• **Repeat DUIs** — Under House Bill 220, offenders would face a class D felony charge if caught driving under the influence for a third time. The bill would also create escalating fines for repeat offenses. The House advanced the bill Wednesday.

• **Family Preservation** — House Bill 291 seeks to reduce the impact of incarceration on families. When a nonviolent offender serves as a caregiver of a dependent child, the bill would call on judges to consider

that role before imposing a sentence for a felony. The House voted in support of the legislation Wednesday.

• **Super Speeders** — Senate Bill 57 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 would help fund Kentucky's emergency trauma network. The Senate advanced the measure Wednesday.

• **Youth Nicotine Use** — Senate Bill 100 seeks to curb underage nicotine use by licensing nicotine retailers and providing more oversight of nicotine sales. Retailers operating without a license could face a misdemeanor or charge, and possibly a felony for a third offense. The Senate passed the bill Wednesday.

• **Antisemitism on Campus** — Senate Joint Resolution 55 would direct Kentucky colleges and universities to adopt policies for combating antisemitism. It also calls on campuses to disband and report any student organizations that have provided resources to terrorist organizations. The resolution received support from the Senate on Wednesday.

• **Disabilities and Parental Rights** — Senate Bill 26 would clarify that disability alone cannot be used as a basis for terminating adoption petitions, terminating parental rights, or determining placement of children. The House Families and Children Committee passed the bill Thursday.

• **Personal Image Rights** — Senate Bill 7 would create legal protections to ensure that an image of a person's unclothed body cannot be used for commercial purposes without explicit consent. The Senate Judiciary Committee advanced the legislation Thursday.

• **Gift Card Scams** — Under Senate Bill 130, individuals who tamper with gift cards with the intention to steal funds could face a class D felony charge. The bill received a nod from the Senate Judiciary Committee Thursday.

• **Counseling Services** — Under House Bill 495, mental health services that seek to ease distress related to sex or sexual attraction would be considered protected counseling services. The bill would prevent state agencies and licensing

authorities from taking adverse actions against mental health professionals or ordained ministers who provide those services. Supporters argue that the bill is needed to prevent discrimination, but critics say it opens the door to conversion therapy. The House State Government Committee passed the measure Thursday.

• **Chronic Wasting Disease** — House Bill 700 would forbid the exportation of wild deer and elk from a chronic wasting disease surveillance zone. Supporters say the goal is to prevent spread of the fatal prion disease and protect Kentucky's deer and elk population. The House Tourism and Outdoor Recreation Committee voted in support of the bill Thursday.

• **Make America Healthy Again** — Senate Concurrent Resolution 61 would establish the Make America Healthy Again Kentucky Task Force and charge the group with exploring ways to integrate the principles for the MAHA movement to improve health outcomes in Kentucky. The Senate Families and Children Committee passed the resolution on Tuesday, and the Senate advanced the measure off the floor Thursday.

• **Reporting Child Abuse** — Under Senate Bill 120, school coaches would receive training on the duties and procedures for reporting child abuse. The legislation would also add language to sports participation forms telling parents and students about the right to report abuse and how to make a report. The Senate passed the bill Thursday.

• **Artificial Intelligence** — Senate Bill 4 would boost oversight and create guidelines for using artificial intelligence in state government and elections. The Senate Committee on State and Local Government gave the bill a nod on Wednesday, and the legislation cleared the Senate on Friday.

Lawmakers are scheduled to reconvene on Tuesday.

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.

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