

Editorial/Opinion

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Budget decisions still underway

As we've reached the halfway point of the 2026 Legislative Session, I want to provide a clear update on where things stand and what Kentuckians can expect in the weeks ahead.

With over 30 legislative days complete of the required 60, the Senate has remained focused on steady, deliberate progress. At this stage of the session, nine of the Senate Majority's 10 top-priority bills passed the Senate. That progress reflects months of preparation during the interim and careful consideration during committee and floor debate.

Before I begin, I have to express what a blessing it was to take part in my final Military Kids Day as your state Senator. Despite construction on our state Capitol Building, the event was a huge success thanks to the Kentucky National Guard, military families, our Senate clerk, my legislative assistant, and so many others who are involved and will remain involved beyond my time in Frankfort. It was a joy to watch the kids enjoy static displays on the Capitol campus, play with the aviation museum's flight simulators, hear from guest speakers and participate in the Capitol scavenger hunt. You can find a video clip of the day's events by going to the KY Senate Republicans YouTube Channel.

STATE BUDGET UPDATE

I have heard from many of you regarding the early budget bill filed in the state House of Representatives and the budget process more broadly. I understand these discussions affect real families, and I appreciate those who have taken the time to share their concerns.

It is important to clarify where we currently stand. The state budget traditionally originates in the House of Representatives. The early House proposal has not yet passed that chamber and remains subject to committee revisions and floor amendments before reaching the Senate. The measure remains in its earliest stages.

To be clear: no final budget decisions have been made.

When the House delivers a proposed budget to the Senate, we will carefully review the proposal, evaluate any changes and make revisions where necessary. That is the Senate's constitutional

responsibility, and we take it seriously.

Questions surrounding health insurance costs, benefit stability and long-term affordability deserve thoughtful review. Those issues require discipline, transparency and careful analysis. In fulfilling the Senate's role in the budget process, our guiding principles remain clear; we will maintain a

structurally balanced budget, ensuring recurring revenues support recurring expenses, exercise discipline with one-time dollars and avoid short-term budgeting approaches that create long-term instability and make thoughtful, transparent decisions that protect both taxpayers and public employees.

There is considerable work ahead before a final budget is enacted, and I will continue keeping you informed as the process moves forward.

With that, I want to update you on several bills making progress this week.

I'm happy to inform you that the first bill of the legislative session to be signed by the governor and become law is Senate Bill (SB) 172. This bill I mentioned last week, upon its Senate approval. It provides an additional tool to the Kentucky Public Service Commission to address energy affordability challenges. Under the bill, upon a utility company's request, the PSC could prevent sudden spikes in utility bills due to fuel surcharges by spreading the costs over time. I'm happy to see this bipartisan measure become law.

A number of bills passed the Senate chamber, some of which I sponsored.

As sponsor of SB 70, and in my role as chair of the Public Pension Oversight Board (PPOB), I brought forward a measure this week to strengthen oversight of Kentucky's public retirement systems. SB 70 makes appointment adjustments to PPOB to ensure that members have direct involvement in pension policy and relevant experience in retirement plan management. The bill adds the chair or vice chair of the Senate State and Local Government Committee and the House State Government Committee, along with the state treasurer or designee. It also allows appointing authorities to select former elected officials with pension expertise to serve. These changes

strengthen accountability and improve institutional knowledge on the board. Our educators, state workers and retirees depend on us to protect the integrity of their retirement systems, and thoughtful oversight is essential to that responsibility.

As PPOB chair, I also sponsored SB 127 to address how annual leave is treated within the Teachers' Retirement System. This bill does not eliminate annual leave. It defines responsibility for the actuarial costs associated with accumulated leave and limits the retirement system's long-term exposure.

I also sponsored SB 80, a proposed constitutional amendment to restore voting rights.

I've had the pleasure of working with the primary co-sponsor of my bill, Sen. Keturah Herron of Louisville, on our joint efforts to pass this measure. The Senate passed identical legislation in 2020 before the session was cut short by the COVID-19 pandemic. SB 80 provides clarity following the 2019 executive order on voting rights restoration by establishing a constitutional framework. Under this amendment, most individuals would have their voting rights automatically restored upon completion of their sentence and probation, with exceptions for election fraud, violent felony offenses, felony sexual offenses and crimes against a child.

The amendment preserves the governor's constitutional authority while providing clear statutory guidance to county clerks and the courts. It also removes outdated language from the constitution and replaces it with appropriate terminology.

This proposal allows the people of Kentucky to decide the issue directly at the ballot box.

As we enter the second half of the session, our focus remains on steady progress and responsible governance. Legislative deadlines are approaching, committees continue to meet daily, and collaboration between chambers will intensify.

Your engagement in this process matters. Good-faith communication strengthens public policy, and I encourage you to continue sharing your thoughts as the legislation advances.

If you have questions or concerns, I'm just a call or an email away. You can reach my office at 502-564-8100 or email me at Jimmy.Higdon@kylegislature.gov.



JIMMY HIGDON

Child care, public safety, education top House Orders

BY REPRESENTATIVE RYAN DALE BIVENS

In the Kentucky legislature, the term "Orders of the Day" refers to the official agenda of business that either the House or Senate will consider on a given day. It lists the bills, resolutions, and motions scheduled for debate, amendment, or vote on the chamber floor.

Before a bill reaches the Orders, it must follow a structured process. First, it is filed by a legislator and assigned to a standing committee based on subject matter. The committee reviews the bill, holds hearings where testimony from the public, stakeholders, and experts can be presented. Bills must receive at least one hearing before being reported out of committee, though some legislation may have multiple hearings. Once a committee approves a bill, it is either placed on the Orders of the Day or re-assigned to another committee for further consideration. This happens a great deal with bills that would cost the state money or impact multiple agencies or programs. Once it clears the committee process, legislation is placed on the Orders of the Day and ready for full House (or Senate) consideration. However, just because legislation is on the Orders does not mean it will pass the House, simply that it is ready to be considered.

The Orders are basically an agenda, ensuring an organized flow of legislative business and providing members and the public notice of what will be considered each day. Here are a handful of the bills that were on the Orders and cleared the House this week:

HB 6 expands safe, affordable child care for working parents, removes barriers for children with disabilities, and promotes community-based innovation. It strengthens the Child Care Assistance Program, enhances quality ratings, improves transparency, and permanently establishes the CCAP income exclusion - creating a more accessible, high-quality system that supports families and children statewide.

HB 10 would strengthen accountability, transparency, and continuity of government during gubernatorial transitions in the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

HB 139 would strengthen Kentucky's election system by ensuring only eligible voters are on the rolls, standardizing candidate filing forms, and requiring timely delivery of election materials and faster results reporting. It sets school district boundaries before school board filing deadlines, adjusts common school tax rate elections, requires districts



Photo by Andrew West

Representative Ryan Bivens presents HB 111, legislation aimed at protecting farmers' authority over animal health decisions. The measure was approved by the House and now heads to the Kentucky Senate.

to post election bonds, mandates pre-election testing of tabulating equipment for all elections, updates write-in procedures, allows withdrawals to trigger party nominations, and bars officials from certifying votes for deceased, withdrawn, or disqualified candidates.

HB 213 would provide city and county governments and universities the ability to reemploy retired police officers without incurring employer retirement contributions.

HB 257 would shift Kentucky's education accountability to a growth-focused model by modifying the state system in four ways: reducing state testing, tracking individual student growth, allowing districts to adopt local quality indicators to boost community engagement, and prioritizing attendance. Kentucky would join 36 states using chronic absenteeism as an accountability measure.

HB 414 would help law enforcement solve and prevent crime, as well as exonerate the innocent by authorizing local law enforcement to collect DNA samples from individuals charged with a felony at the time of arrest, booking, or initial appearance at a local jail.

HB 455 would restrict the use of artificial intelligence

by licensed professionals in therapy and psychotherapy services, such as licensed psychologists and licensed clinical social workers. The measure would not apply to religious counseling, peer support, or self-help materials and educational resources that are available to the public and do not purport to offer therapy or psychotherapy services.

HB 485 would modernize Kentucky's mental health statutes to ensure those suffering from mental illness get proper care and treatment and improve public safety by ensuring appropriate treatment and legal processes.

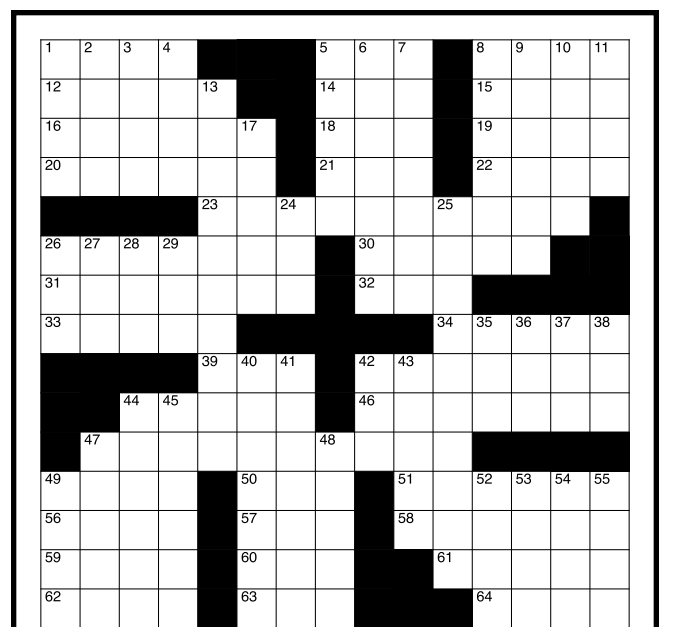
HB 529 would update statutes relating to the appointment, service, and operation of the Kentucky Parole Board, ensuring consistency, transparency, and functionality in parole decision-making while maintaining a strong focus on public safety and victims' rights.

HB 562 would expand educational and workforce opportunities for students with disabilities by creating an additional high school diploma option for eligible students who currently receive only a certificate of completion.

HB 577 would strengthen and expand the Kentucky Innovation Act to better support entrepreneur-led economic growth and attract talent, investment, and emerging companies to the Commonwealth.

HJR 50 would direct the state auditor to study the applicable statutes, administrative regulations, and agency policies that impact the opening and operating of licensed and certified child care centers and report findings and recommendations to the legislature.

As always, I can be reached anytime through the toll-free message line in Frankfort at 1-800-372-7181. You can also contact me via email at Ryan.Bivens@kylegislature.gov and keep track through the Kentucky legislature's website at legislature.ky.gov.



CLUES ACROSS

1. What travelers must do
5. Calendar month
8. Hopefully quickly
12. Once more
14. Bravo! Bravo! Bravo!
15. "Cheers" actress Perlman
16. Astronomy unit
18. Savings vehicle
19. Get your ducks in this
20. Right away
21. Popular sports league
22. Containers
23. Entireties
26. One who wassails
30. Turned-up position
31. Extreme modesty
32. Writing utensil
33. Rewards (archaic)
34. Ancient capital
39. S. American wood sorrel
42. General discomfort
44. Phillippine island
46. A witty saying
47. One who summarizes
49. Covered in
50. Mimic
51. Henry was a notable one
56. Daughter of Hera and Zeus
57. Retired NFLer Newton
58. Playground equipment
59. Concept
60. Satisfaction
61. Fishing net
62. Hammer end
63. A father's male child
64. Japanese drink

CLUES DOWN

1. Off-Broadway figure
2. Gelatinous substance
3. Concern
4. "Lick It Up" rockers
5. Serbian river
6. Part of a hat
7. Bowl-shaped drinking vessel
8. Semitic language
9. Utter a shrill cry
10. Long times
11. Animal parts
13. Causing annoyance
17. Amorous talker
24. Attempt
25. Harmonic effects
26. Cost per mile
27. They ___
28. Bitterly regret
29. Not even
35. A way to drop
36. Title of respect
37. World leader
38. Georgia rockers
40. National capital
41. Great Plains people
42. Duck-sized dinosaur genus
43. Architectural recesses
44. Member of U.S. Navy
45. Muntainous
47. Kite bird
48. Sweetheart (archaic)
49. Popular snack made of potato
52. 70s songsters The Bee ___
53. SE China port ___-men
54. Something to fill up
55. League of Legends character



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HOW TO CONTACT US
Call: (270) 358-3118
Fax: (270) 358-4852

ADVERTISING, OBITUARIES, SUBSCRIPTIONS
ALLISON SHEPHERD, Publisher
publisher@laruecountyherald.com
270-358-3118 ext # 1

NEWS, COMMUNITY
VICTORIA COX, Editor
editor@laruecountyherald.com
270-358-3118 ext # 2

SPORTS
JOSH CLAYWELL, Sports Writer
joshuaclaywell85@gmail.com

(USPS 241-220)
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