

Legislative Update

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As the session moves into its final weeks, the pace of introduction of new legislation has slowed substantially. However, the General Assembly is working diligently to consider and take action on the close to 5000 Senate and House bills that have been filed so far this session. This report provides a summary of a few of the many important issues on which the House took action this past week.

Road Safety - H. 3496 -This session the General Assembly is considering comprehensive reforms to our State's driving under the influence laws. As passed by the House, H.3496 implements a tiered system of punishment with four levels of impairment: "driving while impaired," "driving with an unlawful alcohol concentration," "operating a motor vehicle with an unlawful and high concentration," and "operating a motor vehicle with an unlawful and gross alcohol concentration." Among many other things, this comprehensive legislation strengthens penalties, requires treatment for those convicted of a first offense, and for certain offenders allows for the use of ignition interlock devices and continuous alcohol-monitoring devices.

Workers' Compensation - S. 332 -The House amended, approved, and sent back to the Senate S. 332, a bill that reforms the South Carolina workers' compensation system. Among the several key changes, the bill drastically scales down the Second Injury Fund, sets forth stronger standards for establishing a repetitive trauma case to ensure that an injury is work-related and not age-related, provides stricter oversight of insurance companies' rates, and strengthens penalties for people committing workers' compensation fraud.

Education - S.322 - The House approved the "SOUTH CAROLINA NATIONAL GUARD COLLEGE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM ACT." This bill enacts the "South Carolina National Guard College Assistance Program Act" which provides for the Commission on Higher Education to award college assistance program grants to members of the South Carolina National Guard. An eligible member of the South Carolina National Guard may receive a grant up to an amount equal to one hundred percent of college tuition and fees, provided, however, the total of all grants received may not exceed eighteen thousand dollars. A member may not qualify for college assistance program grants for more than one hundred thirty semester hours or equivalent quarter credits. Grants are not to be awarded for graduate degree courses. The legislation eliminates provisions for the one-half tuition program for South Carolina National Guard members and discontinues the existing loan repayment program.

Infrastructure - H.3666 -The House passed and sent to the Senate the "SOUTH CAROLINA RURAL INFRASTRUCTURE ACT." This bill establishes the South Carolina Rural Infrastructure Authority and provides for its governance, powers, and duties. The authority is authorized to provide loans and other financial assistance to a municipality, county, special purpose or public service district, and a public works commission to finance rural infrastructure facilities. The legislation allows state appropriations, grants, loan repayments, and other available amounts to be credited to the fund of the authority and authorizes lending to and borrowing by eligible entities through the Authority.

Conference Committees will be meeting in the coming days and weeks to hash out the differences between House and Senate versions of several pieces of important legislation such as appropriations bills. Depending on the actions of the Senate in response to House bills, several more conference committee appointments are likely to be made. It is important to remember that the legislature operates on two-year terms. This being year one of a two-year term means that any legislation not passed this year remains viable for next year's session.