

County Commission Update: Legislative Watch

By Wade Mathews, Public Information Officer

One of the many things that make this country so great is a government “of the people, by the people, for the people...” Citizens of this nation get to elect representatives to government, who then make laws, hopefully for the benefit of those citizens.

You have an opportunity to observe that principle in action right now, during the 2013 session of the Utah State Legislature. Tooele County Commissioners are also keeping a close eye on certain issues being debated on Capitol Hill that could impact our county.

Of utmost importance, of course, is the budget. The state legislature has the responsibility of appropriating money for many different programs that affect us here at home. Just a few of those include education which is one of Governor Gary Herbert’s top priorities, transportation, and economic development.

With the county already in dire financial straits, the Commissioners are concerned about any cuts to federal and state funded programs that will further reduce county revenue sources. In an effort to proactively prepare for reduced revenues, the Commissioners recently enacted five policies to control spending in the county. The policies announced in the last Commission meeting on February 19th.

- 1 – The Commission is going to reopen the 2013 budget and reductions will be made.
- 2 – All discretionary spending is frozen and will not be approved by the Commission. This includes all capital projects, equipment purchases and non-critical repairs, supply purchases (beyond those absolutely required to perform present work), and travel/training expenses.
- 3 – Cell phone allowances are suspended effective March 2013. If reinstated at some point in the future, there will be no back-pay for missed months.
- 4 – All other discretionary spending should be limited to items that are absolutely critical to current operations within county departments.
- 5 – To the extent possible, efforts should be made to limit expenses to salaries/wages and utilities.

The Commission hopes these steps will help bridge the gap between county revenue and expenses, and reduce the amount required for the proposed property tax increase.

Commissioners are also highly interested in SB 72, the bill that would create the Prison Land Management Authority to direct the relocation of the Utah State Penitentiary. This bill would designate membership in a prison relocation committee which would evaluate bids for a new location and make recommendations to the Legislature and governor. The Commissioners hope their expressed interest in the prison move will earn them at least one seat on that committee.

“We don’t know enough yet about the project to make any informed decisions because we don’t have a seat at the table,” said Commissioner Shawn Milne. Commissioner Bruce Clegg agreed. “No one from Tooele has been proposed to be on the prison committee. We would like to be involved with that committee,” he said.

Tooele County along with Weber, Davis, and Utah Counties are vying to be selected as the site of the new prison. One factor in determining the new location is a route through unpopulated areas to the Matheson Courthouse and the University of Utah Hospital, which a location along I-80 in Tooele County would provide. Commissioner Clegg said, “We’ve got the workforce and we’ve got the infrastructure to support a new prison. We’re just trying to work with the state to determine their needs.”

“We don’t have all of the parameters. It would be nice if we had a checklist to know if we meet all of the state’s prison relocation requirements,” said Commissioner Milne.

The Commissioners are concerned with any legislation affecting Energy Solutions, a primary source of hazardous waste mitigation fees for Tooele County. “We’ve got our legislators working on being supportive of allowing all waste streams Energy Solutions is licensed to handle,” said Commissioner Clegg. “That includes being in favor of disposing of depleted uranium, a class A waste.”

Senate Bill 109, which just passed the Senate, is a disappointment to the Commissioners. They liked the original form of the bill, but after several amendments added in the Senate, Commissioners feel the bill would give too much power over water rights to just one person, the state engineer. In its current form, the bill could cause problems for agriculture and give too much preference to municipalities. That bill is headed to the House of Representatives next. Jim Gowans, the county’s lobbyist, says SB 109 still has a long distance to go before passage.

There are many more bills being debated in both chambers of the State Legislature in the remaining weeks. It will be interesting to see which bills make it to the governor’s desk for signature, and which of those will be signed into law, allowed to become law without a signature, or vetoed.