

Legislative leaders clash on issues

By Whitney Burdette

Although Republican legislative leaders have touted legal reform, tax reform and labor laws as a few key topics they'd like to tackle, some Democrats say lawmakers are better off concentrating on creating a qualified workforce.

Senate President Bill Cole, Senate Minority Leader Jeff Kessler, House Speaker Tim Armstead and House Minority Leader Tim Miley spoke Thursday to the West Virginia Press Association about some of the issues the Legislature has worked on and will continue to address for the next four weeks.

Although Cole and Armstead, both Republicans, touted the Legislature's actions on legal reform and the debate surrounding repealing prevailing wage and right to work legislation, Kessler and Miley, both Democrats, said they're worried about some of the bills Republicans are pushing through the process.

"I see things happen that I'm worried about that are coming down the pike, that are being introduced," Kessler said. "They're getting ram-rodged through. It's going to hurt the people of this state."

Armstead, who has served in the House of Delegates since 1998, said members of his party have long wanted a chance to have their voices heard on the issues.

"We're more than happy to have a debate," he said. "That's what we've wanted for years."

Armstead said he's heard "a lot of incorrect rhetoric" about some legislation introduced, including House Bill 2001, which repealed the state's Alternative and Renewable Energy Portfolio Act. Kessler said he thinks repealing that legislation, originally passed in 2009, doesn't accomplish anything, but Armstead disagrees.

"We have a huge part of our energy sector, a huge employer in our state — the coal industry — that's been under constant attack from Washington," Armstead said. "We would turn around and in 2009 do a bill that piles on and jumps on and decides we're going to say we're going to make sure our electricity is provided, by 2025, by another energy source? What were we thinking? That is one of the most outrageous pieces of legislation I've seen in the 16 years I've been up there."

Republicans and Democrats also disagree on repealing the state's prevailing wage law. Cole characterized the current standard as one that's been abused in West Virginia for years.

"We've loaded up the Capitol. We have busloads emptying out each and every day on prevailing wage," Cole said. "I've been a 'repeal it' guy all the way through. I think it's a bad law."

Cole noted 18 states don't have prevailing wage. Of those, eight have never had a law on the books and 10 have repealed their standards.

"The problem is, we've abused that law in West Virginia," Cole said. "We've abused it for a number of years to the point it is an unfairly high wage supported by you, the taxpayer."

But Kessler disagreed, saying repealing the law will hurt the construction industry by driving down

wages.

“In a state that has the lowest per capita income in the nation, we’re going to pass a prevailing wage law that drives those wages down further,” Kessler said. “You tell me how that makes sense. I don’t think it does.”

Kessler suggested instead the Legislature focus on creating a stronger workforce.

“The most important thing we can have in this state for folks to come here and set up jobs here is not reducing our water bill and letting them pollute the water, it’s not reducing safety standards,” Kessler said. “It’s having a qualified, sober workforce in this state. What initiatives are we doing? We have the lowest workforce participation rate in the country. Those are things we need to be tackling.”

Miley suggested the key factor in strengthening the state’s workforce is increasing access to education, primarily two-year community and technical colleges, and changing the way families think about education. He has proposed a scholarship much like the current Promise for students who want to study in the state’s community and technical colleges. He’d also like to see teachers earn more money.

“It’s hard to talk about placing a priority on education if we don’t put our money where our mouth is,” Miley said. “Where we spend our time and money is a reflection of where our priorities are. If we don’t spend our time and money paying our teachers and educators, we won’t get good ones.”

While some areas of the state are experiencing job loss, other parts, like Miley’s district in Harrison County, are seeing an increase in the number of jobs available. But those jobs go unfilled, Miley said, because of a lack of motivation and a substance abuse problem.

“We have a workforce preparedness issue in this state,” Miley said.

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