

The State's budget is a very hot topic in Raleigh. Not enough money. Which programs to cut? Any taxes to raise? No easy answers. The State's fiscal year ends on June 30, so look for budget discussions to become increasingly intense as the month of June progresses. Other matters are being considered, but just keep in mind that the budget is very nearly all consuming.

The Senate passed **HB 1294 – Risk Pool Premiums and Notices** this week. This bill permits the Risk Pool to implement premium subsidies if a federal grant for this purpose comes through. Insurers will be required to notify applicants who qualify for the Pool of the Pool's existence, and the abbreviated pre-existing condition waiting period that new Pool enrollees have enjoyed for the first 6 months of this year will be extended for the rest of this year. The Senate made small changes to the bill, and it will now be sent back to the House for concurrence in the Senate amendments. I expect the bill to be ratified.

**HB 1392 – Out-of-State Emergency Services/Risk Pool** was considered in Senate Commerce this week. The Pool pays Medicare rates for medical services provided in North Carolina. For Pool participants who receive emergency services out of state, the risk exists that they could be "balance billed" for charges that exceed the amount that the Pool can pay. The idea is to authorize the Pool to negotiate these charges and pay higher than Medicare if that is required. The Committee is concerned that the Pool's resources may be unnecessarily depleted by permitting payments at rates higher than Medicare, and the bill will be considered again at a later date.

**HB 589 – Insurance/Cover Hearing Aids** received a favorable report in House Insurance this week, and will now go to Appropriations. It previously received favorable treatment in House Health. It would require up to \$2500 in coverage for children and young adults up to 22 years of age. The bill would apply to the State Health Plan, hence the trip to Appropriations. The Senate version of this legislation, **SB 375**, has passed out of Senate Commerce and is now in Appropriations/Base Budget.

That should cover the bases for now. We may soon reach a point where the budget will take precedence over all issues. The House and Senate calendars have been unusually full of bills, suggesting that an effort is being made to clear the decks for budget deliberations.

A little Politics 101 to wrap things up. Rep. Bonner Stiller (R-Oak Island) is going to resign next week to attend to his family and his law practice. Rep. Cary Allred (R-Burlington) resigned on June 1. Rep. Dan Blue has been appointed to fill the Senate seat of the late Vernon Malone. Four contenders are vying for the appointment to former Rep. Blue's seat.

That will do it for now. Have a great weekend, and stay tuned as things progress, regress or otherwise move at the General Assembly!