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TAX BREAK FOR JOBS BEING RENEWED

A new push to offer tax breaks to attract large-scale business expansions is being pushed by Senate Republicans and economic development officials.

They contend that Michigan is missing out on jobs being aggressively sought by other states.

The legislation (SBs 242 through 244) was introduced last week in the Senate, and would allow businesses expanding or opening up new locations with enough good-paying jobs to capture 50 to 100 percent of their new employees' state income tax withholdings for up to 10 years.

Michigan stopped issuing new business tax credits beginning in 2012 as part of Governor Snyder's overhaul that cut business taxes, instead favoring cash grants and loans for economic development.

The measures easily won approval in the Republican-led Senate late last year but died in the GOP-controlled House.

SNYDER ED COMMISSION RECOMMENDS SWEEPING CHANGES

Saying lawmakers and the Governor must confront bleak realities in Michigan's education system, a 25-member commission created by Governor Rick Snyder last May, last week released its recommendations that call for free community college for everyone, merit-based scholarships for high school graduates who attend the state's public universities and abolish grade levels and advance students only once they master content.

The panel's recommendations also call for:

--Access to preschool for all four-year-olds

--State aid to help pay for school buildings in higher poverty districts as well as those used by publicly funded charter schools; and,

--A 2018 constitutional amendment that would give the Governor clout over education policy by having direct oversight of the State Education Department.

The commission estimated the cost at \$2.5 billion more annually to implement every recommendation.

Governor Snyder called the report a blueprint that can be used long into the future.

TAX ROLLBACK EFFORT NOT LIKELY OVER

Although efforts by House Republicans to roll back the state's income tax from 4.25 to 3.9 percent languishes on the House floor, the legislation (HB 4001) appears to be on life support but

not totally dead. How interested House Speaker Tom Leonard (R-DeWitt) is in resurrecting it remains to be seen.

Meanwhile, the Senate Finance Committee has begun taking testimony on what the state might do to dramatically change course and attract more people and businesses. Discussion started with Committee Chair Jack Brandenburg's (R-Harrison Twp.) legislation (SB 4) that would eliminate the state Income Tax over a five-year period.

HOUSE DEMS HAVE THEIR OWN TAX CUT PLAN

A group of House Democrats are pushing a different type of tax cut a graduated income tax they say would help "working families."

According to Rep. Robert Wittenberg (D-Oak Park), his plan would save residents making \$35,000 a year three and half times more than they would save under the GOP income tax reduction plan. And those making \$70,000 a year would see twice the savings.

And two House Democrats have introduced a pair of bills that would fully restore Michigan's Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). The credit was reduced to six percent as part of the Republican tax overhaul in 2011.

TAX BREAK BILLS CLEAR SENATE PANEL

Despite strong objection from the education community, the Senate Finance Committee unanimously sent to the Senate floor legislation (SBs 94 and 95) that would speed up the implementation of a 2013-passed tax break to encourage auto sales.

Under the bills, the tax break phase-in would be completed in 2029 10 years earlier than under the current law.

OPEN RECORDS BILLS HEADED TO THE SENATE

In a unanimous vote, the House has passed all 10 bills of the Legislative Open Records Act (LORA). The package is intended to allow for more public access to documents with the Legislature and Governor's office.

There are exemptions, however. They include constituent communications with lawmakers, documents prepared and owned by the majority and minority caucuses, records pertaining to an internal investigation, security measures and those subject to attorney-client privilege.

Don't look for the same response from the Senate.

Senate Majority Leader Arlan Meekhof (R-West Olive) has indicated that due to a lack of "overwhelming support" in the Senate, he is not planning on holding committee hearings on similar bills that are collecting dust in his Senate Government Operations Committee.

Senator Meekhof also indicated to reporters that there is no support for the House package in the Senate either.

JUSTICE REFORM PACKAGE GOES TO SNYDER

The Senate has concurred with House-approved versions of a 20-bill package of criminal justice reforms and sent the measures to Governor Rick Snyder.

The bills (SB 5 through SB 13, SB 15 through SB 24 and SB 50) are designed to improve monitoring and evaluation of recidivism data in the hopes of increasing the chances that parolees and those on probation can stay out of prison.

Senate Bill 14, which would create a small, limited incentive for businesses to take the risk of hiring someone who was on parole or probation did not pass.

NEW PPP BILL GOES TO THE HOUSE

The House is now in possession of a Senate-passed bill (SB 97), the Public, Private Partnerships (PPP) measure, that would allow public authorities to enter into public-private agreements to advance large-dollar projects such as infrastructure improvement, new laboratories, updated health care facilities or autonomous vehicle production.

In the last session, a similar bill (SB 627) that passed the Senate died in the House Commerce Committee during Lamé Duck over concerns that it would pave the way for toll roads.

SENATE COMMITTEE PLACES ITS BETS ON INTERNET GAMING BILLS

The Senate Regulatory Reform Committee has moved to the Senate floor a three-bill package of legislation (SBs 203, 204 and 205) that would allow up to eight Michigan casinos to maintain internet gaming websites.

Specifically, the bills state a gaming license could be issued only to an existing casino licensee, or under certain conditions to an Indian Tribe that operates a Michigan casino.

Meanwhile, Rep. Brant Iden (R-Oshtemo Twp.), chair of the House Regulatory Committee, says Michigan “definitely needs to be open...” to sports betting if the U.S. Supreme Court rules in favor of states being allowed to authorize its casinos to offer sports betting.

The nation’s high court is awaiting the opinion of U.S. Solicitor General before ruling on whether it will take a case involving New Jersey’s suit to allow sports betting.

DEMS: BRING BACK ENVIRONMENTAL BOARDS

Convinced that public input and oversight over the Department of Environmental Quality’s (DEQ) air quality, water quality, and oil and gas operations would restore a layer of accountability in environmental enforcement, House and Senate Democrats are moving forward with legislation to bring back citizen oversight commissions.

The commission process was eliminated during Governor John Engler’s administration in the early ‘90s.