

March 15, 2019

## Minnesota Legislative Update: Progress Report at First Committee Deadline

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Today marks the first committee deadline at the Minnesota Legislature, whereby policy bills needed to clear all policy committees in either the House or Senate to remain viable. As legislators rushed to meet deadline, committees held a number of evening meetings and stacked agendas. The second committee deadline, by which bills must be approved by all committees in the other body to remain viable, is two weeks away. After that, the Legislature will turn its attention to crafting a biennial budget.

Tax and finance committees in the House heard bills implementing Governor Walz's budget proposal and conforming the state's tax code to the federal Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017.

## Cannabis Legalization

On Monday, members of the Senate Judiciary committee heard a proposal to legalize recreational cannabis ([SF 619](#)) authored by Sen. Melissa Franzen (DFL-Edina). The hearing drew a sizeable crowd as a broad spectrum of stakeholders took to the testifiers' table. Sen. Scott Jensen (R-Chaska) was a co-author of the bill and told his colleagues on the committee that, while he did not support the legalization of recreational cannabis use, he signed on to start "a critical conversation about cannabis regulation in Minnesota." While Senator Jensen expressed concerns about the impact of cannabis on health, he said he thinks it's time to take a serious look at decriminalizing the drug.

Proponents of SF 619 argued that the full legalization of cannabis would permit lawmakers to develop strong regulatory practices, increase tax revenue and provide redress for the disproportionate impact that cannabis prohibition has had on communities of color. Those in support of the bill also said that, by making the drug legal, legislators could mitigate the role of the black market, protecting the public from cannabis products that are excessively potent or infused with other, more dangerous drugs. These proponents said that passing SF 619 would help the lawmakers control what products were marketed

to youth and enhance education around the adverse health effects of cannabis, thereby decreasing their likelihood to become users. Support from the bill came largely from pro-legalization advocacy groups but also included the ACLU, the Libertarian Party of Minnesota and several medical cannabis patients.

The hearing drew strong opposition from medical professionals, members of law enforcement and community members who said the bill would create the exact problems to which it claimed to offer a solution. The opponents said that the legalization of recreational use would create vast public safety risks and raised concerns about the lack of scientific medical studies on cannabis. Law enforcement cited the challenge of people potentially driving under the influence of cannabis — while no road-side test exists for cannabis like there is for alcohol. Furthermore, they argued that the black market would actually flourish in response to the legislation because users would seek a more potent version of the drug than that which would be available on the state-regulated market. While several testifiers in opposition to the bill acknowledged disproportionate criminalization as a concern, they said that full legalization isn't the solution to that problem.

After two hours of testimony and earnest discussion among members, the bill went to a vote and failed to pass, with a party-line vote of 3-6, killing the bill for the year. Senator Ron Latz (DFL-St. Louis Park) tried to amend the bill to create a task force to further study the issue, but that amendment was also voted down. The House has been moving slowly on cannabis which likely means full legalization will not happen this year.

## Broadband

This week, the House Greater Minnesota Jobs and Economic Development Finance Division heard [HF 7](#), one of the first bills introduced this session. As introduced, HF 7, authored by Rep. Rob Ecklund (DFL-International Falls), appropriates \$35 million in fiscal year 2020 and \$35 million in fiscal year 2021 from the general fund to the commissioner of the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) to deposit in the Border-to-Border Broadband fund account.

During the meeting, the committee adopted an amendment offered by Rep. Sandy Layman (R-Cohasset) appropriating an additional \$15 million to be made available the day after HF 7's final enactment, totaling a \$85 million investment through 2021 to subsidize the development of broadband coverage throughout greater Minnesota. These appropriations will be used to accomplish the state's statutory broadband goals. By 2022, it is a state goal to provide access to high-speed broadband with download speeds of at least 25 megabits per second and upload speeds of at least three megabits per second to all Minnesota homes and businesses, aiming to place Minnesota in the top five states for broadband access.

Steve Grove, Commissioner of DEED, said HF 7 is a “critical, foundational piece” for the state because it ensures all Minnesotans, not just those in the metro area, have the ability to succeed. All testifiers advocated for the passage of the bill, indicating the indispensability of high-speed internet for businesses in rural areas to flourish and compete with their metropolitan counterparts. One testifier indicated broadband access is especially important for rural residents because a number

of them access their doctor via webcam, saving them from driving hundreds of miles to the nearest hospital.

HF 7 was passed on a voice vote and sent to the House Committee on Ways and Means. Its companion bill in the Senate is [SF 9](#), authored by Sen. Mark Koran (R-North Branch).

## Important Dates

- March 19, 2019 – Special Election for House District 11B
- March 29, 2019 – Second Legislative Committee Deadline
- April 12, 2019 – Third Legislative Committee Deadline
- May 1, 2019 – All Finance Bills Passed Off House/Senate Floor
- May 6, 2019 – Fiscal Targets Agreed to and Provided to Finance Bill Conference Committees
- May 13, 2019 – Conference Committee Reports Due to Original Body
- May 20, 2019 – Last Day of the Legislative Session

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