



SEN. ZAKAS: ISSUES EMERGING FOR THE 2010 SESSION

Lawmakers to Consider Economy, Property Tax Caps, Unemployment Insurance, Ethics Standards, Redistricting

JOBS AND THE ECONOMY: News reports of economic recovery from the national recession seem mixed. Wall Street rallies while Main Street loses jobs. One thing is certain: too many Hoosiers are unemployed. It will be important to foster job creation, control state spending and avoid tax hikes. Budget cuts and wage freezes have been asserted. The Senate will consider reducing spending by another 5 percent, adding to cuts already made in this year's budget. There will be no state government pay increases in 2010 and the Senate will continue the current freeze on all but essential hiring. Funding for schools and public safety needs to be protected as much as possible. Economic growth and the jobs it brings are the answer. That's why one proposal is calling for an immediate, bipartisan review of the best economic development practices used by other states in attracting, retaining and expanding business investment and job creation.



PROPERTY TAX CAPS: Lawmakers realize that many fellow Hoosiers were hurt and made tough decisions as a result of the court-ordered changes to Indiana's property tax law. For too many – especially seniors on fixed incomes and young homeowners on limited incomes – Indiana's old property tax system served as an unfair, outdated gauge of their wealth and their ability to pay ever-escalating taxes. Legislators should side with taxpayers and work for permanent property tax relief and reforms. Many legislators believe it is essential for the General Assembly to again pass a constitutional amendment permanently capping property taxes. Lawmakers successfully passed the amendment once before. Doing so again this year would give Indiana voters final say in whether or not the caps would be added to the Indiana Constitution.

UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE: To help our struggling businesses through the national recession, a proposal has been made to delay the implementation of Indiana's new unemployment insurance (UI) premiums. For many years, premiums paid by businesses failed to keep pace with benefits paid to jobless Hoosiers, even when unemployment rates were at historic lows. On top of this structural imbalance, each year millions of dollars in waste, fraud and abuse made the problem worse. Given the fragile national economy, state lawmakers last session recognized the need to slowly implement any UI premium increases on Indiana employers. We consequently avoided any 2009 increase and spread subsequent changes over three years. Because of the depth and duration of the national recession, the proposal would delay those increases for one additional year.



ETHICS: Legislation further enhancing state government ethics is among key Senate proposals for the 2010 session. These bills stem from the desire for more open and transparent government and not from corruption and prosecutions that have plagued officials elsewhere. Indiana already has in place many preventative measures, including public reporting of campaign contributions, ethics training for state officials, lobbyist registration and reporting, and an inspector general as watchdog of the people's business. Our state provides easy access to legislation, roll-call votes and online coverage of committee and floor proceedings. Still, to help ensure the trust of those we serve, senators will work to amend our state's lobbying laws by (1) establishing a waiting period before former legislators can professionally lobby state lawmakers; (2) requiring university officials who lobby legislators to meet the same requirements as other lobbyists; and (3) further limiting and providing additional reporting of any gifts, meals and entertainment provided to legislators by lobbyists.



REDISTRICTING: A number of redistricting reforms are being proposed which include statutory guidelines on how legislative districts should be objectively drawn following the upcoming 2010 census, as well as a constitutional amendment establishing an independent commission for drawing state legislative and congressional district boundaries in the future. A bill to require an in-depth two to three year bipartisan look at best practices used by other states in drawing district maps will also be offered. Currently, the Indiana Constitution specifically tasks the Indiana General Assembly with drawing legislative districts. Changing this constitutional duty to an independent redistricting commission is possible, but only if a constitutional amendment for that purpose is passed by two separately elected sessions of the legislature and then approved by Indiana voters.