

coffers during the biennium; borrowing from the permanent coal tax trust; and maybe even the biennially ill-fated general sales tax.

Unfortunately, the governor has repeatedly stated she will veto any increase in taxes. Consequently, the legislature must either face down the governor or turn the tax increase of its choice into a referendum.

The earliest any referendum could be placed before the people? June. It will be hard for school districts and the university system to budget on the uncertain outcome and timing of a June referendum. As for brokering a deal with the permanent coal tax trust, it depends on nothing more than a three-fourths vote in each house.

Pay plan

HB 13 (Dave Lewis), state pay plan, will pass this session. We hope to sweeten it with more money for university employee salaries and protect the step and lane interests of state institution teachers.

Retirement

HB 294 (Lewis), 3 percent guaranteed annual benefit adjustment (GABA), will also pass this session. In addition, other bills to improve public employee retirement benefits are on their way to the governor's desk.

K-12 teacher salaries

No legislature has ever seen more bills meant to do something positive about teacher salaries. Most failed to get out of committee.

The Senate Education Committee did give a good hearing to Senate Bills 99 and 101 (Sam Kitzenberg) to establish a statewide teacher salary that would push all Montana teachers toward the national average.

Ultimately, a statewide salary structure is the only way to provide teachers everywhere an intrastate fair and interstate competitive salary, but its moment has not arrived.

HB 42 (Gay Ann Masolo) to establish an annual \$3,000 stipend for National Board Certified teachers and HB 140 (Masolo) to provide student loan reimbursement up to \$3,000 annually for four years to teachers who assume high demand/low supply positions are still alive, albeit underfunded or not funded at all respectively.

Classified k-12 employees

The legislature will not adopt an increase in the minimum wage, nor will it address the unfair denial of unemployment compensation to certain classified public school personnel who are in fact unemployed when school is not in session.

Education and union defense

Legislative committees tabled HB 250 (Joe Balyeat) to propose a constitutional amendment to delete our constitution's guarantee of "equality of educational opportunity" and equitable state funding of our public schools and HB 588 (Balyeat) to require "objectivity" in science education (creationism).

Unfortunately, the legislature must entertain yet another attempt to privatize public education through tuition tax credits, HB 555 (Balyeat).

And the legislature may yet debate HB 593 (Vick) to impede, if not destroy, the ability of unions (especially MEA-MFT), corporations, and other associations to defend and promote their interests in ballot issue government.

Keep the faith

Folks, you have been wonderful throughout. Your commitment and support of quality government programs and services, including public education, means everything. Keep the faith. MEA-MFT will continue to stand strong throughout, advocating for our members' interests.

And know this, if our March 3 rally did nothing else, it confirmed the unequivocal arrival of our new union. It also proved beyond a doubt that MEA-MFT and Montanans statewide will not stand by and let their world-class public schools and universities falter due to legislative neglect.

Thanks to all of you who attended the rally. Thanks to all who have called, written, e-mailed, faxed, and buttonholed legislators on bills that affect public services and public education.

MEA-MFT governance and staff are proud to work for you. You get it. ■

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