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Finance (General Government Subcommittee, Vice-Chair)
Rules & Reference

SENATOR LOU GENTILE
30TH DISTRICT

Senate Finance Committee
Senator Scott Oelslager, Chair
Report to Finance Committee | General Government Subcommittee
Tuesday, May 26, 2015

INTRODUCTION

Chairman Oelslager, Ranking Member Skindell, and fellow members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you regarding the General Government Subcommittee and the Senate Democratic Caucus's goals on how to strengthen House Bill 64 for Ohio's families and communities. First, I would like to thank Chair of the General Government Subcommittee, Senator Jordan, on a job well done. Our subcommittee heard from numerous stakeholders over the course of the last few weeks, and Senator Jordan did a tremendous job conducting the committee.

As Vice Chair, I worked with Senator Skindell and other members of my caucus to address a variety of concerns that were raised over the course of the last several weeks. We will be submitting several amendments that we believe will improve H.B. 64, especially in the areas of water quality and food safety, transportation and public transit, veteran's affairs as well as strengthening and improving our elections process, among others.

WATER QUALITY & FOOD SAFETY

Over the past year, Ohio has faced a water crisis in Toledo and in the Great Lakes Region of our state as well as a more recent issue relating to food contamination. We have an opportunity in this budget to provide for better protections for the people in our state while improving our water quality standards, safeguarding communities from foodborne illnesses and outbreaks, and ensuring that we are maintaining the highest standards of public health and safety.

The House removed a provision that would bring Ohio in line with the federal Reduction of Lead in Drinking Water Act of 2011. Our caucus will be introducing an amendment that ensures Ohio is conforming to federal law and protects our water from lead contamination.

Ohio needs stronger penalties for those who knowingly and purposefully violate water pollution laws. Current law states that, regardless of the severity of the violation, all water pollution crimes are considered misdemeanors. We will be proposing that the Ohio EPA should be able to recoup the response costs if a person is convicted of a violation of the Water Pollution Control Law. We should not have to rely on the federal government to respond to violations that occur in Ohio.

Additionally, we would like to see language restored that would provide Ohio EPA emergency responders the authority to request chemical information that may include trade secrets in the event of an emergency. The EPA would be allowed to share this information with water treatment operators exposed to or potentially affected by a chemical spill. The removed provision would protect the confidentiality of the trade secret information provided to emergency responders and water treatment plant operators.

In the area of dairy inspection, the House removed funding from the dairy inspection line in the House passed version of HB 64. The Senate Democrats believe that funding should be restored to ensure proper coverage of the Department of Agriculture's dairy inspections so that those dairy products will be allowed into interstate commerce under the FDA's Grade A program.

In a similar vein to the cuts to dairy inspections, the House version of the budget removed funding to support the Food Safety Modernization Act that focuses on prevention instead of reaction to foodborne illnesses; the Senate Democrats will be bringing forth an amendment to address this issue.

TRANSPORTATION & PUBLIC TRANSIT

Our caucus remains committed to investing in our public transit system so that Ohioans can get to work or to school. Currently, Ohio's \$0.63 transit spending per capita ranks among the lowest in the nation (38th out of 51), just below South Dakota. Every \$1 billion of investment in public transit annually creates an average of 41,100 jobs supported for a year. Public transportation spending saves people money and strengthens the local economy. While we applaud ODOT for commissioning the Ohio Statewide Transit Needs study, there is simply not enough being done to address Ohio's public transit needs. As a result, our Caucus will be putting forward an amendment that increases public transit funding for each year of the biennium.

Due to our state's strategic location in the Midwest and access to waterways, shipping has been critical to Ohio's economy and our growing logistics sector. In recognizing the important role of our marine cargo terminals, our Caucus will introduce an amendment that creates the Ohio Maritime Assistance Program whereby cities and port authorities can apply to ODOT for grants to construct new marine cargo terminals or to improve existing marine cargo terminals located on the shores of Lake Erie, the Ohio River or, on a Lake Erie tributary.

ELECTIONS & VOTING

Our caucus supports providing \$15 million to the Secretary of State to purchase electronic poll books for each county board of elections. Not only would this further modernize our boards of elections, but will also reduce wait time and confusion by voters.

We also believe that Ohio should do more to encourage everyone to vote, so the Senate Democrats are proposing that all registered voters be mailed an absentee ballot to ensure every Ohioan can vote as easily as possible.

VETERANS ORGANIZATIONS

We heard testimony in committee from several veterans' organizations who have asked for additional resources. We are extremely grateful for the work our veterans do and the important contributions they make to our local communities. However, there is more work the state of Ohio can do to support our veterans and to recognize the sacrifices they have made to their state and country. Senate Democrats will be offering an amendment to create the Veterans Opportunity Grant Program to be administered by the Department of Veterans Services for the purpose of providing additional resources to the veteran's organizations who continue to provide programming, services, and outreach to the veteran community in our state.

MISCELLANEOUS

DAS administratively handles many of the organizational functions of the state. It is in that regard that we have amendments in which:

1. Under the Buy Ohio program a bid which exceeds the lowest bid price by more than 5% but less than 10% will not be considered excessive if the bidder can demonstrate it will create and retain jobs in Ohio if it receives the contract.
2. Requires state agencies to require a bidder on a contract to submit a jobs impact statement as a part of the bid including the number of jobs expected to be created or retained in the state.
3. Restores the funding cuts in the House version of HB 64 for agencies who had requested increased funding to cover higher rent being charged by DAS in certain buildings.

Finally, we have drafted an amendment that removes a sale and lease back agreement provision in the bill. We believe these agreements may potentially have a harmful effect on Ohio's workers by effectively eliminating jobs or by reducing the wages and benefits of employees who are able to retain their jobs as a result of a sale and leaseback agreement.

CONCLUSION

While these are our highlighted priorities for the concerns we discussed in the General Government Subcommittee, they are only a small number of the total amendments that Senate Democrats will be offering in support of our citizens and communities across the state. I appreciate the openness that Senator Jordan demonstrated in running the subcommittee and his willingness to work with us. I look forward to continuing our work on HB 64 with my colleagues in my caucus as well as the Republican caucus to bring greater economic growth to Ohio.