Capitol News

February 26, 2021

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# This Week’s Highlights

The Legislature met last Monday’s fiscal committee cutoff and turned its attention to **virtual floor action**. For the next two weeks, lawmakers will spend their days and evenings voting on bills to meet the March 9th House of Origin cutoff, when House bills must pass the House and Senate bills must pass the Senate. Remember, though, that there are bills that are deemed “necessary to implement the budget” or NTIB, that are not subject to any of these cutoff deadlines.

If the first few days of fulltime voting are any indication, it will be a slow process. Connectivity and broadband issues continue to affect lawmakers’ ability to record their votes. **Patience** is the watchword of the session.

On Monday, the Senate Health & Long Term Care Committee heard **SB 5371**, the bill imposing a **tax on sweetened beverages.** Revenue from this tax is directed to fund foundational public health and health equity initiatives. The bill also directs the Department of Health (DOH) to evaluate the effects of the tax one and three years after implementation. In testimony, public health and other health care organizations supported the bill as an important tool to reduce the negative health effects of sugary drinks while also providing critical funding for public health. Opponents of the bill, including business owners and grocery, food and beverage industry representatives, said this tax would hurt their sales. This bill is likely NTIB, so not subject to any cutoff deadline.

A historical note…Sunday marks the 20th anniversary of the **Nisqually Earthquake**. The Legislature was in session then, with lawmakers, lobbyists, and the public on the Capitol Campus. As one who was in the Capitol Building when it struck, it was a frightening experience, with the ground rolling underneath and a freight train-like all around. The Capitol’s dome lifted off of its pillars, twisted, then settled back down. Cracks were visible around the building. Remarkably, there were no injuries. Within days, the Legislature continued its work, turning committee hearing rooms into makeshift House and Senate “floors.” The Capitol building itself was closed for two years while repairs were made.

# Priority Bill Updates

* **HB 1196**, the bill that creates reimbursement parity for **audio-only consultations**, passed the House 94-3 on Wednesday. There were several amendments adopted on the floor. The amendments require patient consent to billing prior to delivering an audio-only service; make a violation of the consent requirement unprofessional conduct under the Uniform Disciplinary Act; clarify that telephone calls such as the sharing of laboratory results, are not billed as a separate service; and extend the termination date for the Telemedicine Collaborative from December 31, 2021, to December 31, 2023.
* **SB 5169,** the bill providing reimbursement to health care providers for the cost of **PPE** when treating patients in person, has passed the Senate unanimously. It has been referred to the House Health Care & Wellness Committee
* **SB 5302,** the bill establishing a **database of vendors** of state-approved PPE equipment, did not pass the Senate Ways & Means Committee before the fiscal committee cutoff. No further consideration of this bill is likely this session.
* **SB 5229,** the legislation that creates a **health equity continuing education** requirement for health care providers, has passed the Senate. It has been referred to the House Health Care & Wellness Committee.
* **SB 5284** has passed the Senate. This bill **eliminates subminimum wage** certificates for people with disabilities after July 31, 2023.

# Next Week’s Events

Next week marks the halfway point of the session. Lawmakers will continue their fulltime floor action, with limited committee meetings. One meeting of note is Thursday’s Senate Labor, Commerce & Tribal Affairs Committee’s work session on the Employment Security Department’s security breach. They will also hear an update on unemployment insurance claims.