Legislators talk past, upcoming session projects

By HALEY HUMPHREY

Sens. Paul Rosino and Lonnie Paxton and Rep. Brian Hill discussed legislation they worked on last session as well as projects they are looking into for the upcoming session at the Mustang Chamber of Commerce’s Aug. 26 luncheon.

Hill told attendees he was proud to work on several bills, including the Supportive Adulthood Act, which ensures children who age out of the foster care system attain resources, thus reducing the state’s incarceration rate. Services will now be provided to foster care children who are 18, rather than 18.

The tweaks will save the state money, which typically pays $3.2 million for every 1 in 4 incarcerates, who were in the foster care system, Hill said.

The representative also mentioned the Sarah Stitt Act, which will allow incarcerates to receive necessary documentation to secure employment.

“That was actually based on the recommendation of one of our business owners in Mustang,” Hill said. The business owner employed a man from Texas, who was coming out of incarceration, and had career tech certification proof. Before the law, incarcerates with career tech skills did not have access to certifi- cation documents to provide to a future employer.

“As it reduced recidivism rates in Texas, they’re seeing they’re going to save you a lot of money,” Hill said.

“Just to give you a little background, Hill also receives in his office is about roads and bridges. It’s almost like a patchwork quilt sometimes,” Hill said, regarding some of his work.

As a member of the Road User Charge Task Force, the representative is studying how the state is going to pay for roadwork long-term.

Currently, people pay for roads and bridges with gas money at the pump. The amount of money people pay at the pump has been reducing because of more efficient vehicles.

Hill also worked on the Religious Freedom Act to protect people’s First Amendment rights.

Paxton opened his discussion with trivia by reminding attendees Jan. 8, 2024, marks the 25-year anniversary of the bridge between Mustang and Tuttle. The projects they are funded on President Joe Biden’s American Rescue Plan, which allocated about $1.9 billion to Oklahoma.

There are some categories the state can spend the money within. Whenever the state receives the most money possible, it is.

There will eventually be a state website, where members of the public can submit where they think the money should go.

As the U.S. Census numbers have been released, Paxton also discussed redistricting. Paxton will redraw redistricting lines according to the new population numbers, as he is on the committee.

“The State Oklahoma did not grow as much as suburban Oklahoma,” he said.

With the rapid metropolitan area growth, Hill will no longer have the northern section of Tuttle, as he will serve more of Mustang. The state is just under about four million people.

Populations must be found in the eastern area of the state, as well as the southeastern, which pushes districts closer to the metro. Regarding Paxton’s district, since the senator is being pushed in from the west, he will now have about 4 square-miles of Mustang, of which he did not serve before. He will also lose between 800 and 700 square-miles of his current district.

The year following the Census, the federal government must send states data no later than April 1. Oklahoma’s Constitution requires legislators to have its Census com- pleted by the time session adjourns the end of May.

Legislative session always begins the first Monday in February and ends the last Friday in May.

However, the federal government did not release data until mid-August. Oklahoma legislators based the state’s legislative numbers on 2015-2019 Census Bureau Estimates data.

The committee will reconvene in a special session sometime in mid-November to redraw congressional districts for the state, as they must by exact person.

“We’ve not starting from scratch, but we are starting to redraw what we did,” Paxton said.

Hopefully by November, the committee will have maps out for the public to review and make suggestions, he added.

Rosino informed attendees of his work on the Developmental Disabilities Act. Oklahoma has about a 15-year waiting list for people who need wraparound services for developmental and intellectual disabilities.

Because the state has failed, Rosino said the Legislature will have a third-party assess the waiting list to prioritize people based on their needs, rather than chronologically.

The Department of Human Services had been keeping track of the list with an Excel spreadsheet and noted.

Now, Rosino said there will be an IT piece involved to address the list more efficiently. He anticipates it will be between a $7 and $8 million project.

The senator also noted the spread of Amazon delivery across the state, with more warehouses. Rosino backed the use of Amazon Scout, a six-wheeled robot that is used to deliver packages for the company.

“It’s basically a drone on wheels,” he said.

Rosino informed attendees the state fire marshal’s office and the Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics, the force that will work with the state fire marshal’s office and the Oklahoma Medical Marijuana Authority.

“At the same time, you eliminate the illegal stuff, it helps the legal industry out,” Paxton added.

As a veteran, Rosino noted his efforts in obtaining more mental health services for the state’s veterans. With the recent terror in Afghanistan, more veterans are suffering.

Rosino recently toured several places that offer veteran services throughout Oklahoma, including the Dale K. Graham Veterans Foundation in Norman and the newly-opened Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic at Red Rock in Lawton.

The Cohen Veterans Network would like to open two more locations throughout the state, one in Oklahoma City and the other in Enid. At more than 320,000 veterans, Oklahoma has one of the largest veteran populations per capita in the nation.

Oklahoma Labor Commissioner Leslie Osborn, (middle) moderated the legislative panel at the Mustang Chamber of Commerce’s luncheon Aug. 26. The legislators present to speak to attendees were Rep. Brian Hill, (left), Sen. Lonnie Paxton, (center) and Sen. Paul Rosino. Photo / Haley Humphrey