



Sep 02
2021
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Legislators talk past, upcoming session projects

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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 Successful 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 16, 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 certification documents to provide to a future employer.

"As it reduced recidivism rates in Texas, we believe it's going to do the same in Oklahoma, and that's going to save you and I tax dollar money," Hill said.

The No. 1 call Hill also receives in his office is about roads and bridges. "It feels like a patchwork quilt sometimes," Hill said, regarding some of the county's streets.

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, 2022 signifies the 20-year anniversary of the bridge between Mustang and Tuttle. The senator also informed people about President Joe Biden's American Rescue Plan, which allocated about \$1.9 billion to Oklahoma.

There are certain categories the state can spend the money within. Whenever the state receives the money, it has four years to spend it. There will eventually be a state



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

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.

"Rural 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 western 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 600 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 completed 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 be by exact person.

"We're 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 13-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 notepad.

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.

Municipalities have the choice of opting out of Amazon Scout, as well.

Regarding the McGirt decision, Rosino said there was an attorney who allegedly tried to release about 2,000 foster care children in southeast Oklahoma back to their parents. He commended the Legislature for stepping in and preventing children from being put in harms way.

Legislators note interim studies they requested for next session

Hill said the Legislature will be bringing in the top six industries in the state to determine what the workforce gap is. Higher education

institutions and career tech entities will also participate in the study to discuss careers that need more workers.

Tinker Air Force Base could hire all the STEM students in the state right now and still need more, Hill said.

Paxton mentioned the rural illegal marijuana grow operations occurring across the state.

"The Russian, Mexican and Asian cartels are here in Oklahoma because it's easier to grow the product and process it and transport it across the nation than bring it across the border of Mexico," he said.

To combat this, the Public Safety Committee is establishing a task force that will work with the Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics, 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, he said.

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 330,000 veterans, Oklahoma has one of the largest veteran populations per capita in the nation.