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Many bills are still evolving through legislative process

With the Louisiana Legislature at the halfway point, hundreds of bills are evolving. Here's a look at some of the issues:

BUDGET: The House approved the \$29.2 billion state budget — \$29.6 billion if \$400 million in federal matching funds materialize — and sent it to the Senate.

The budget includes more than \$8 billion in federal hurricane relief funds. The budget, covering state general spending for the fiscal year that begins July 1, is some \$875 million more than the current year's.

Still left on the table is an expected \$500 million in income that cannot be spent because of the restriction that ties the annual growth in state spending to the growth in the private economy.

The budget includes annual raises of \$2,400 minimum for teachers, \$1,500 for state employees, \$750 for school support workers, and the equivalent of 5 percent for college faculty.

CAPITAL OUTLAY: The House approved the capital outlay budget, but Republicans bloc voted to block passage of the bonded debt authorization act that funds most of it. It's a political move to force Gov. Kathleen Blanco and the Democratic majority to the bargaining table on the budget. Republicans wanted to cut spending to make room for \$250 million more in tax cuts that the governor's proposed \$150 million.

COASTAL PLAN: One thing all the way through the process is the Legislature's approval of the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority's outline for coastal restoration and hurricane protection.

INSURANCE: The House is considering two competing bills eliminating the Insurance Rating Commission. The Senate-passed version eliminates the commission and is up before the House Insurance Committee. The committee has already approved and sent to the full House another version that creates a consumer advocate position for insurance issues.

The House has sent to the Senate a bill that grants cash incentives for companies to write new policies in the state.

The Citizens Property Insurance Corp., the state's insurer of last resort who can't get private insurance, would go private itself, under a Senate-passed bill before the House.

The House has approved a bill "bundling" good and bad risk policies held by Citizens and offering them to private companies.

I-49 FUNDING: Two House-passed bills clarifying how state money from the unclaimed property fund can be used to finance I-49 north and south are awaiting Senate action.

BUILDING CODE: The House has approved a revision in the new building code to ease the inspection requirements for rural areas. The Senate is expected to revise the bill.

SALES TAX HOLIDAY: Both the House and Senate have passed versions of the bill to eliminate state sales taxes for back-to-school purchases during the first week in August. Gov. Kathleen Blanco supports the House version by Rep. Taylor Townsend, D-Natchitoches, that would declare the holiday for the first Thursday through Monday of August, up to a cap of \$2,500. The Senate version authorized the holiday for the first week in August. Legislators want to add a Christmas shopping tax holiday.

TAX CUTS: The House and Senate have rival plans for cutting income taxes to those who itemize, only about 20 percent of tax filers who tend to be middle- and upper-income. The House version gives one in five taxpayers a total of about \$70 million, while senators voted to give these taxpayers back \$157 million.

In the meantime, a proposal by Sen. Lydia Jackson, D-Shreveport, to be considered today would give 100 percent of refunds to those taxpayers who are below the official poverty line, which varies by the size of the family.

The House and Senate also have rival versions of Gov. Kathleen Blanco's proposed \$100-a-child extra tax credit for those tax filers with minor children as well as proposals to cut business utility taxes.

ETHICS: The House has passed the "glass pockets" bill that requires legislators to reveal sources of their income, and that of their spouses. Opponents tacked on amendments making it applicable to all local elected officials, too. The bills are headed for a Senate committee that is normally a graveyard for such reform legislation.

COCKFIGHTING: A Senate version outlaws cockfighting immediately; the House-passed version bans cockfighting in 18 months.

GUNS: A House committee killed Ruston Rep. Rick Gallot's bill that would have closed a loophole in the state's school gun-free law that allows guns in university dorms, even though university policies already ban guns in campus dorms.

ABORTION: A bill banning late-term abortions, called "partial birth abortions" has cleared the House and is awaiting Senate action. It tracks the recent 5-4 U.S. Supreme Court holding such laws constitutional.

CHILD SUPPORT: A House committee killed a bill that would have held parents responsible for child support until the age of 23, if the child is in college.

SHREVEPORT STINK: A House-passed bill that gives the city of Shreveport more teeth to clamp down on the odor emitted by the Louisiana Proteins rendering plant is awaiting a Senate committee hearing.

(John Hill)