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Lawmakers looking to education

Dunn explains recent vote against bill aimed at regulating payday lenders

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David Nichol, T-H Staff Writer

With the issue of tax cuts apparently settled, lawmakers in Little Rock are now looking to education.

"The next big issue will be education funding," said state Sen. Jack Crumbly. "All the attention now will be focused on education funding — not only facilities funding but per-pupil expenditures, those types of things. There will still be a hearing with the masters that's coming up later on this month."

The masters, appointed by the state Supreme Court, have a hearing scheduled for Feb. 22. But Crumbly said the Legislature was not waiting on the masters for everything.

"Certainly we're waiting to see what the masters will say. But while everyone will be waiting on the masters, we're still going to have to move forward with issues that will always face us in the area of education."

Crumbly, the superintendent of the Earle School District, said he has a special interest in schools located in the Delta. He said this includes continuing to allow schools to use funding from the National School Lunch Act for teacher salaries.

State Rep. David Dunn agreed that education would be the next big issue, and said he has heard figures from \$200 million to \$400 million. "It's all over the board," he said.

One thing he mentioned was a \$40 million proposal for pre-kindergarten.

On the cut in sales tax and income tax relief, Dunn said, "Let's just say we agreed to agree." About education funding, he said, "Maybe this time we will have the wherewithal to put our



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money in a good program and try to please as many people as possible. But we can't please everybody."

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On another subject, Dunn was one of the few House members to vote against a bill which would fine payday lending companies for charging higher interest than the law allows.

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"I did, and I'll tell you why," he said. "It's a personal deal with me. I find it very difficult to single out a business that is operating under the constitution as we currently interpret it. It's a legal business, and whether it's right or whether you like it, you really start opening up a can of worms when you start going after things that you don't like."

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He said there are differing interpretations of the interest charged by payday lenders, and he said that needs to be worked out. He also said the industry may need regulating.

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"I have no love lost for payday lenders, and there are some tragic stories out there about people involved with payday lenders. There are also tragic stories with banks and pawn shops. There are various and sundry stories, but where does the buck stop? If it was illegal, that would be one thing. But the businessman in me just can't vote to do away with a business just because some people don't like them."

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Dunn said he believes the bill will pass the Senate and become law, "and we'll go from there." He said the bill may be challenged in court. "I wanted a bill that would do something for the folks out here being victimized by these practices, and I just don't think this bill does it."

Gov. Mike Beebe's proposal to cut the sales tax on groceries from 6 cents to 3 cents could be signed into law this week. All that remains is the Senate agreeing with a minor House amendment before the bill goes to Beebe's desk.

The tax cut approval, and the near-certain enactment of accompanying tax relief measures, means lawmakers can begin to focus on funding for Arkansas' 450,000-student public school system.

"I think you'll see the focus shift to the bills that back up the (school-funding) adequacy report," said House Speaker Benny Petrus, D-Stuttgart. "I think you'll see the primary focus of the General Assembly being on the education committees."

Sen. Jim Argue, who chairs the Senate Education Committee, said he expects bills will be filed this week that contain recommendations developed by a legislative panel on how the state can provide an adequate education. Argue, D-Little Rock, said he doesn't know if a hike in per-student funding will be among them, however.

The panel has called for increasing state funding per student from \$5,662 to \$5,690, beginning July 1, and hiking the rate again to \$5,760 in July 2008. The increases are much lower

than the nearly 8.6 percent increase recommended by consultants hired by the state earlier this year.

Beebe has said he wants to increase school funding, but he has not said whether that increase should go toward per-pupil spending.

"That's one of the things we're discussing," Argue said. "If the Beebe administration wanted to increase the adjustments to the matrix, I suspect that will be done by amendment. That will not be done with the original bill."

Funding for local projects also will likely resurface this week. Petrus said he expects the Joint Budget Committee to review a proposal to revamp the way these projects are funded.

The measure is a response to a court ruling that the Legislature in 2005 violated the state constitution's ban on funding for strictly local projects. It would create a commission that would review grants for the projects.

But the proposal faces opposition from some lawmakers, including Argue, who say it is a way to skirt the court order. Argue has asked Attorney General Dustin McDaniel for a legal opinion, but Petrus said he doesn't believe the legislation has to wait for that review.

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