

Some bright spots in the session

Stephanie Grace

Thanks to some decisive action by the Louisiana Legislature, public school students will now be able to put on their own sunscreen.

Who says this has been a do-nothing session?

Actually, almost everyone does. Rather than tackle challenges more daunting than recognizing that sunscreen isn't the sort of medication that should only be applied by a school nurse, lawmakers kicked a bunch of cans down the road. Efforts to restructure the tax code, head off next year's fiscal cliff, improve the state's decrepit infrastructure, reform the TOPS program, and more all fizzled. But, there were some bright spots, some worthy legislation that made the cut and some bad potential laws that got blocked. So I'm here today not to criticize, but to say something nice.

The most important outcome of the session is the passage of criminal justice reform. The success of the package, which was watered down from its initial form but remained potent, is encouraging on two fronts.

The first is that it will help the state achieve some vital goals, both financial and humanitarian. It's projected to reduce Louisiana's world-leading incarceration rate by 10 percent over 10 years, and to save taxpayers \$262 million during that period. The bills will also reduce sentences for some nonviolent crimes and help released offenders get back into the mainstream by tailoring financial penalties to the person's ability to pay, allowing drug offenders to receive food stamps upon release, and putting 70 percent of the savings into reducing recidivism.

The second is that it was a rare bipartisan initiative. Democratic Gov. John Bel Edwards promised to tackle the issue in his 2015 campaign, and lots of Republican lawmakers and conservative interest groups worked to make it happen. This was particularly impressive because plenty of legislators proved willing to take votes that future opponents could label as soft on crime, and because it showed that, despite Attorney General Jeff Sessions' repudiation of the growing consensus on criminal justice reform, it remains strong, even in conservative states.

The Legislature also expanded protections for victims of domestic

violence in two ways. It passed Democratic New Orleans state Rep. Helena Moreno's bill to include dating partners under the law, and it adopted a bill by state Rep. Pat Connick, R-Marrero, and state Sen. Dan Claitor, R-Baton Rouge, to apply the law to same-sex partners. Adoption of the second bill wasn't pretty. Lawmakers first voted it down. They only approved it when references to marriage were removed - and they were warned that the existing law could be declared unconstitutional now that same-sex marriage is legal, which would leave all victims more vulnerable. But at least it happened.

Lawmakers also passed a common-sense bill by state Rep. Ted James, D-Baton Rouge, to encourage de-escalation training for police following last year's Alton Sterling shooting. And they outlawed corporal punishment in schools of kids with disabilities, an initiative by state Rep. Franklin Foil, a Baton Rouge Republican. A separate attempt to ban the practice for all students failed.

Elsewhere, legislative committees blocked bills that would have imposed unreasonable top-down limits over local actions. Legislation that didn't make it through the process includes efforts by state Rep. Thomas Carmody, R-Shreveport, and state Sen. Beth Mizell, R-Franklin, that would have blocked localities from removing Confederate monuments; a bill by state Sen. Conrad Appel, R-Metairie, that would have stopped cities from requiring residential developers to include affordable housing in their projects; and an attempt by state Rep. Valarie Hodges, R-Denham Springs, to outlaw so-called sanctuary cities. Ironically, the fight against the bills was led by Democrats, even though deference to local control is generally a Republican talking point.

More broadly, the state Senate, under the sure-handed leadership of Senate President John Alario, R-Westwego, continued to function in a bipartisan manner.

The House was more chaotic, with speaker Taylor Barras, R-New Iberia, facing questions over his leadership, including from his hometown paper. But although the conservative faction that controls the key money committees didn't do much to help the state solve its perennial budget woes, some individual Republicans did at least to try push structural change, sometimes incurring the wrath of fellow Republicans in the process.

House leaders and their supporters push back at criticism by touting their newfound independence, and it's true that this is the first team in modern times that was not chosen with the support of the governor.

If it eventually starts using that independence to solve problems rather than obstruct, then we might have something to talk about.