

Legislative Update by Melinda Suddes of Gaston County RW (edited).

Our NC General Assembly continues supporting conservative values.

- Concealed Carry: The Senate advanced the Freedom to Carry bill (SB 50) which is a counterpart to the House's NC Constitutional Carry Act (HB 5). The bill is in the House Committee on Rules, Calendar and Operations.
- Eliminating DEI in our Public Institutions: Both chambers of the General Assembly are working to eliminate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in all state and local government entities (HB 171 and SB 227). The Senate passed its bill and referred it to the House and the House bill is now in the Committee on Rules, Calendar and Operations.
- Cell Phone Use in Schools: Both Houses filed bills to curb cell-phone use in public schools. The House version (HB 87) and the Senate version SB 55 have some differences to iron out but hopefully this legislation will pass and go to Governor Stein soon.
- Border Protection: Another important bill to watch is NC Border Protection Act (SB 153). This bill requires state and local law enforcement to cooperate with federal immigration officials. The bill passed the Senate and is moving forward in the House.
- Curbing Regulations: The House has introduced a bill designed to rein in oppressive regulations by the executive branch (HB 402). The bill has bipartisan support but critics are crying that the additional legislative approval time could be harmful for health regulations. The bill is in the House Judiciary Committee.
- Reducing Healthcare Costs: Both chambers of the NC General Assembly are pushing for healthcare reforms to provide price transparency and authorization efficiency for patients across the state (HB 434) and (SB 316). The House bill is in the Committee on Health. The Senate bill was referred to the House and passed a first reading. The bill is now with the Committee on Rules, Calendar and Operations.

**Workforce Housing:** In response to continued housing shortages in western North Carolina, this local bill (HB 306) allows Blowing Rock, Boone, Watauga County and Watauga County Board of Education to construct and provide affordable housing for town and county employees and public school teachers. This bill seems to have bipartisan support and is currently with the Committee on Housing and Development.

**Election Day Holiday:** Another legislative initiative this year (HB 31) would make the statewide general election day a paid holiday for state employees. The bipartisan bill has more than 60 sponsors from both parties. It was referred to the Committee on Election Law in February. No further action has been taken on this bill to date.

**Fewer Early Voting Days:** Republicans have filed a bill (HB 66) which would reduce the early voting period by moving the start date from the third Thursday before an election to the second Monday before that election. This bill would reduce early voting from 17 to 6 days.

Opponents of the bill are crying “voter suppression.” But, between absentee voting and six days of early voting, plus election day voting, how many more days do likely voters really need to participate in the election? This is especially true if election day becomes a holiday. This bill has not yet received a committee hearing.

**Access to High School Sports:** The Senate filed a bill (SB 48) that would allow students who are attending private schools or who are homeschooling to play on sports teams at public high schools. School districts would be allowed to charge those non-public school students a “reasonable fee” to participate. The bill comes at a time when some school districts bar athletic access to students who don’t attend their schools. There has been no committee action on this bill to date.

**Driving with Animals and Children:** The House is addressing the issue of distractions while driving with a new bill (HB 394). This bill would prohibit people from driving with an animal in their lap or interacting with an animal or child in the car “in a manner that impairs or restricts the proper operation of the motor vehicle and results in operation that is careless, reckless, or heedless.” A violation would include a fine of \$100 and court costs. Common sense seems to dictate that pets in a

driver's lap is a bad idea but penalizing parents for interacting with a child in the car seems like a slippery slope. How do we define distractions? Every parent could possibly violate this law. Maybe this bill should just be about pets in a driver's lap.

**Driver's license on your phone:** Last year, lawmakers commissioned a study by the NC Division of Motor Vehicles (NCDMV) to determine the feasibility of digital driver's licenses. The study was presented to a joint House and Senate Committee on Transportation in January and the recommendation was to move forward with digital driver's licenses at no cost to NC citizens. The Senate has introduced a bill (SB 10) that would codify these recommendations to offer people the option of an electronic driver's license. And the bill would allow digital licenses as an acceptable form of voter ID. The issues, of course, with digital driver's licenses are privacy and potential voter fraud. Last September, a Wake County Superior Court Judge said that state voting law doesn't bar digital IDs, despite Republican insistence that it doesn't allow for anything that isn't a tangible, physical item. We are all for technology but this issue may need to be studied further to address privacy and election integrity concerns before any action is taken.

**Foster Care in NC Act:** Bipartisan bill to reform the foster care system in North Carolina (HB 612). The bill proposes several reforms to improve the safety and well-being of children in foster care. It clarifies rules for placement in foster care; it strengthens visitation requirements before a child is returned to parents or guardians; and it tightens procedures for investigating abuse and neglect. The bill has been referred to several committees for review.

Please link to <https://www.ncleg.gov/> for information on all the calendars, committees, and bills.