



West

THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS

Montana State Visit

On January 29th and 30th, CSG West Director, Edgar Ruiz and accompanying staff visited Helena, Montana to learn about key issues being addressed by lawmakers in the Treasure State. The state visit included meetings with CSG West Chair, Representative Kimberly Dudik, legislative leaders and staff from Montana Governor Steve Bullock's office to share information about upcoming organizational programming, including the 72nd CSG West Annual Meeting that will convene in Big Sky, Montana in July. Additional meetings were held with members of the Montana Host State Committee to review planning details about the Annual Meeting. The visit culminated with a reception in the capitol rotunda that invited all legislators to stop by and learn about the organization and the upcoming meeting in Big Sky.

The nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Division projected an upward trend for state finances over the next two years prompting legislators to focus on crafting the biennial state budget as the 2019 session begins. Unlike years past, legislators on both sides of the aisle, and the Governor's office, agreed on the projections. Governor Bullock proposed a balanced budget with a \$300 million year-end cushion that includes nearly \$160 million in new taxes for those two years. The Republican controlled Legislature has stated that they are not inclined to raise taxes in shaping the state's two-year \$10 billion budget.

Two major issues confronting legislators at the session start were Medicaid expansion and state infrastructure improvements. Medicaid expansion narrowly passed in 2015 with legislators and the Governor agreeing to extend health coverage to people with incomes below \$16,000 a year. That meant coverage for nearly 100,000 Montanans. However, that coverage will end in June if lawmakers don't re-authorize it this year. Montana voters rejected a ballot initiative in November that would have provided permanent funding for Medicaid expansion with a new tobacco tax. Legislators are now looking for ways to fund the program.

Another major issue being revisited by the legislature is funding improvements to the state's infrastructure. The Governor has proposed a \$290 million infrastructure plan, which includes local water-and-sewer projects, bridges, broadband infrastructure, state buildings and college structures. The plan, however, relies partly on state bonding, which requires approval by two-thirds of each house of the Legislature. In prior sessions, the Legislature has rejected past plans because of the borrowing of funds through bonding.



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The legislature is also tackling a proposal backed by state anglers, boaters, farmers and conservationists [to spend \\$6.5 million fighting aquatic invasive species](#). State lawmakers are also being asked by the State Insurance Commissioner to consider new regulations aimed at reducing the cost of prescription drugs. The Commissioner is proposing additional rules on the contracts between health insurance companies and what he refers to as the middlemen of the pharmaceutical drug industry. Also on the legislative agenda is a bill that has narrowly passed the House that would require two thirds vote for the legislature to create or increase any new taxes.

The Montana legislature is scheduled to adjourn May 1st, 2019.

