

**SENATE INTERIM COMMITTEE ON CITY, COUNTY, & LOCAL AFFAIRS
HOUSE INTERIM COMMITTEE ON CITY, COUNTY, & LOCAL AFFAIRS**

MEETING JOINTLY

THURSDAY, AUGUST 25, 2016

MINUTES

The Senate and House Interim Committees on City, County, and Local Affairs, met Thursday, August 25, 2015 at the Hot Springs Convention Center, Hot Springs, Arkansas. The meeting was held during the Association of Arkansas Counties (AAC) Annual Conference.

Committee members present were Senators Missy Irvin, Senate Chair, and Linda Collins-Smith. Representatives Betty Overbey, House Chair, Mary Bentley, Charles Blake, Lance Eads, Kenneth Ferguson, and Justin Gonzales.

Other legislators present were Senators Bobby Pierce and Eddie Joe Williams. Representatives Bob Ballinger, Scott Baltz, Jim Dotson, Lanny Fite, Vivian Flowers, Mickey Gates, Mary "Prissy" Hickerson, Grant Hodges, Douglas House, Joe Jett, Fredrick Love, Mathew Pitsch, and Laurie Rushing.

Call to Order

Scott Perkins, Communications Director, Association of Arkansas Counties (AAC), introduced the members, then thanked the panel of legislators for their participation. The panel of legislators included: Senators Bobby Pierce and Missy Irvin, Representatives Mathew Pitsch, Laurie Rushing, plus Scott Baltz who participated on behalf of Representative Michael John Gray, who was unable to attend.

Opening Remarks

Senator Irvin said this discussion is not only to review issues, but also to build relationships with county officials by strengthening communications.

Legislative Panel Review and Discussion

Mr. Perkins asked each legislator to start by describing what accomplishments they are most proud of achieving in the 2015 legislative session. Representative Baltz discussed his legislation that placed RAVE Smart 911 Panic Buttons in all the state's schools. He said the device allows teachers to punch the panic button and within three seconds every teacher on a school campus is alerted. The installation of the device has already saved lives. Representative Baltz said local law enforcement offices are also installing the devices in their offices.

Representative Rushing discussed her legislation, which was passed during the 2015 legislative session, that placed voting machines in four test counties with Garland County as one of the test sites. Representative Rushing said that Garland County had a good experience during the last election with both the counting of ballots and election results coming in quickly. She said that over the next two years the goal is to fund counties throughout the state to allow them to be connected electronically. When this is achieved, a citizen could vote anywhere in the state.

Representative Pitsch said he is most proud of the accomplishments achieved by the General Assembly as a whole in the 2015 legislative session. He referenced comments made earlier by the Governor regarding the state of the economy, jobs, and the falling unemployment rate in Arkansas. Representative Pitsch said he was pleased with the accomplishments made in the 2015 legislative session regarding transportation needs. He believes the legislature, working together as a team, is the most effective way to achieve results.

Senator Pierce said he is proud of the work that was done to fund transportation. He also said that although efforts were made to protect county Turnback funding, more work needs to be done to provide adequate funding for cities and counties.

Senator Irvin said legislation aimed at improving statewide mapping using the State's Office of Geographic Services (GIS) was a great efficiency bill that passed in the 2015 legislative session. She then discussed the effort made by a large number of organizations, including the AAC, which are participating in the Arkansas Unpaved Roads Program. Senator Irvin said efforts will continue to be made to obtain matching funds. The Unpaved Roads Program is important in Arkansas because there are so many dirt and gravel roads. Many problems also exist with low water bridges, sedimentation, and ditches. She said there is not only the need for Best Management Practices to guide building roads, but also to address mitigation issues. Senator Irvin spoke about the importance of communicating with people within each district.

Representative Jett discussed legislation that he and Representative Shepherd created to persuade Lockheed Martin to locate their Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV) plant in the Camden area. Representative Jett said work on the initiative began at the county level. Although the plant did not locate in Arkansas, it was still good legislation. He believes working with the cities and counties is the best way to achieve results. Representative Jett said legislators should listen to their city and county officials.

Mr. Perkins asked the legislators to discuss what challenges they see for the 2017 legislative session and what areas within their districts they will focus on.

Senator Pierce said the legislature needs to focus on how to increase the funding of transportation needs throughout the state for highways and county roads. County judges have a huge task keeping the roads in their area safe and in drivable condition. Coordinating with the county judges is extremely important when working to maintain and improve the roads.

Senator Irvin discussed the need to focus on revenue sources and determine if the right revenue source is being used for a particular program. She said that over the years legislation has created layers upon layers of bureaucracy, which impacts revenue sources available for programs. She believes a comprehensive review will give a better sense of where revenue should be directed. Another area that would greatly enhance efficiency in state government would be to break down barriers between agencies and create a one-stop, online central information clearinghouse for citizens. Information should be collected one time, then allow multiple data systems to share the information.

Representative Jett referenced a priority of the Governor in the next legislative session, which is to cut taxes while maintaining essential government services. Representative Jett said this is a challenge and will be his number one priority. He said he has heard there may be an effort to hand highways back to the counties. Representative Jett said this would cause major problems and he will work against it.

Representative Pitsch said it will be very difficult to achieve tax cuts in the 2017 legislative session. He believes the legislature will need to work together and be very cautious in its deliberations. He said a number of legislators do not understand county government and it will be important for them to hear from county officials on important issues.

Representative Rushing said an issue she will focus on is a moratorium on adding additional Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs) to the 911 system. She believes there should be only one PSAP in each county. She said she is also working on legislation to allow state lands to be transferred to private ownership, lands that are not being fully utilized.

Representative Baltz said that as Chair of the Legislative Blue Ribbon Committee on Local 911 Systems, a priority for him will be the funding of the 911 dispatch centers. He said he is ready to move forward with ideas the 911 Blue Ribbon Committee has developed.

Mr. Perkins asked the legislative panel to tell county officials what are the most effective ways they can communicate with local officials before and during the legislative session.

Representative Jett said the staff of the AAC represent all the counties and AAC is extremely active during all legislative sessions. AAC is good at keeping legislators informed about issues. He provided his cell phone number and said the county officials could text or call his cell phone because the number of e-mails he receives are so overwhelming he is unable to read them all. Representative Rushing also provided her cell phone number and said the easiest way to reach her is by sending a text.

Representative Pitsch said the AAC staff is very effective in keeping legislators informed during the legislative session. He also believes the County Judges Association is one of the strongest lobbying groups within the AAC and he makes it a priority to respond to requests made by a county judge.

Senator Irvin said because the legislators' e-mail information is public, it is almost impossible to determine which messages are being sent from a constituent. She also provided her cell phone number and gave suggestions of the types of information a county official should provide when lobbying a legislator:

- State what issue the proposed legislation is trying to solve
- State why the official supports the proposed legislation
- State how the proposed legislation will impact counties
- State which groups are proponents
- State which groups are opponents

Representative Baltz said the AAC and its staff work closely with the legislature and are very effective in contacting all the legislators, keeping them informed of issues that impact county government.

Craighead County Sheriff Marty Boyd asked legislators to consider an issue the County Sheriffs Association has been working on for the past four years regarding mental health issues in the criminal justice system. Sheriff Boyd said the Association has been reviewing key issues with mental health providers regarding how to address the problems. He said Arkansas is one of only five states who does not have a program for mental health criminal stabilization units. He said the Association will ask the legislature to consider developing mental health units in Arkansas.

Sebastian County Clerk Sharon Brooks said Sebastian County was one of the counties who participated in a pilot program with the new election equipment that was provided by the state through the program. She said the equipment was very effective and cost efficient. She is hopeful the legislature will work towards funding the new equipment and have it used throughout the state.

Faulkner County Judge Jim Baker told the legislators he is concerned about the limited funding for County Extension Offices throughout the state. He said providing adequate funding for all the Extension Offices should be a priority and funds should be channeled directly to the Arkansas County Extension Service. The funds could then be used to bolster their youth and young adult programs. He said the Extension Service has helped the youth in our state as much as any single agency. Their programs go a long way towards keeping young people busy and provides them with important life skills. This helps to keep young people out of jail, which could help with jail overcrowding.

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 11:55 a.m.