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Under the Golden Dome, Too

Greetings, Friends and Neighbors! No snow for the past three days and forecasts of warming! Could spring really be on the way? As spring arrives, the pace at the Iowa Statehouse remains brisk...but busy isn't always best. Let me touch on a few issues we tackled this week.

Texting

On Tuesday the House passed a texting bill that prohibits only writing and sending text messages from a hand-held device. While many Iowans think this is a good idea and that it will keep us safer, let me suggest that most teens can write and send a text blindfolded. The bill did not prohibit surfing the internet on your handheld device, playing games on it, or reading text messages. Those things really DO require one to look at the screen to carry out. The debate was spirited and there were many amendments suggested. Nearly all were defeated. I think Iowans do want distracted drivers to pay attention to what they are doing. I have followed people on the interstate putting on make-up, reading a book, and eating. Eating a big juicy burger without getting it on your clothes is difficult enough as a passenger with both hands available let alone while driving. This bill did not get to the heart of the issue, but was a "feel good" bill to satisfy those demanding a change. The Senate did add reading text messages to the prohibition so the bill will come back to the House to either agree or resist the new language.

Budget

I reported last week that we had received a few of the budget targets, but we still have little additional information. The most glaring gap in the budget is the underfunding of Medicaid. The spreadsheet presented by committee leadership underfunds one of the state's largest programs by \$347 million in FY 2011, expecting to use \$187 million from the Cash Reserve Fund to help fill the hole. They are counting on Congress to extend the extra Medicaid matching rate for another six months to add \$95 million. If that doesn't happen, there will be a new problem. But that issue pales by comparison to the impending shortfall for FY 2012 stemming from the use of one-time money to fund this huge expense.

Health Insurance

The Commerce Committee held a joint meeting to discuss one of the bigger issues facing Iowans--rising health insurance premiums. It was learned last week that 80,000 Iowans were receiving double-digit premium hikes for their state regulated insurance plans. Interestingly, there are bills awaiting passage that would create new, more costly mandates for insurance policies. One is the mental health parity bill (HF 234). I supported and floor managed a mental health parity bill in my first term. This one is so expansive it would cover all diagnoses between the covers of the DSM-IV. The DSM-V is being written and includes new diagnoses including apathy disorder--a severe lack of motivation and internet addiction. I have had teenagers who suffered from both from time to time, and I am not convinced taxpayers want to be mandated to pay for this.

Please continue to contact me at 515-281-3221 or linda.upmeyer@legis.state.ia.us. Check out some of the new pictures with friends who visited the Capitol this week at my website: iowahousepublicans.com/upmeyer.

In the meantime, Think Spring!