


News

GRADD legislative breakfast allows legislators to break down 2020 General Assembly

 By Jacob Mulliken Messenger-Inquirer

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The Green River Area Development District, located at 300 GRADD Way, held its annual legislative breakfast on Saturday allowing local leaders as well as the general public of the GRADD region to learn from their state legislators what major issues they have faced in the 2020 General Assembly.

Five legislators, Sen. Matt Castlen, an Owensboro Republican; Sen. Robby Mills, a Henderson Republican; Rep. Jim Gooch, a Providence Republican; Rep. Suzanne Miles, an Owensboro Republican and Rep. Jim Glenn, an Owensboro Democrat; all took to the podium to highlight specific bills that could not only be good for the region, but could be a boon for the commonwealth as a whole.

Castlen opted to highlight SB 173, focusing on employment and substance use disorder treatment. SB 173 is a bill that Castlen believes will be transformational for employers, “across the Commonwealth of Kentucky,” he said.

“Normally what happens is an individual with substance abuse issues will take a downward spiral in life,” he said. “This is what we are faced with, and I don’t believe any of those individuals woke up one morning and said, ‘I want to be a victim of drugs. I want this to cost me my job. I want this to cost me my family.’ This particular bill gives an employer the opportunity in their policies to be able to offer substance abuse disorder training that lets these individuals keep their job if it is their employers’ will and seek treatment. The last thing I want to do as an employer is let someone go for that — I want to see them get help. I hope this will serve as a model.”

Mills discussed upcoming House bills coming to the Senate, such as the medical marijuana bill passed on Thursday, and described this year’s session as “unique,” given that there appears to be an, “intentional slowdown” to allow legislators to ensure that “what we are passing is needed and means something,” he said.

Mills discussed legislation spanning federal immigration cooperation, school safety, protection of born-alive infants as well as outpatient pharmacy benefits in the Medicaid program. He believes that one bill, SB 2, could serve as a national model, he said.

“Senate Bill 2 is one that I am sponsoring,” he said. “Thursday, we had a committee hearing, and it passed 11 to 7 out of committee,” he said. “This simply requires a photo ID to vote when you go to the polls. I expect this to pass; it may have a court challenge, but we have worked hard to tighten this bill down, and it may very well be the best photo ID bill in the nation when we are finished with it.”

Gooch, like his fellow legislators, spoke on the passing of various bills, including HB 1, an act relating to public welfare; HB 44, relating to key infrastructure assets; as well as HB 136, the medical marijuana bill — a bill that he has been a cosponsor of for the past two years. He believes the bill will be “historic,” he said.

“We have had quite a bit of work,” he said. “Especially this week, we have had quite a bit of bills that passed, a couple you have just heard about. The medical marijuana bill did pass; that was a big issue for Kentucky, and I think that it is kind of historic. We passed one of the toughest medical marijuana bills in the nation. It does not allow smoking, it does not allow public use, so if you do have it, it has to be in the double container. There are ways you can use that. When you take away the smoking, we are making sure that it is used for the purpose it is meant.”

Miles, who covered bills related to human trafficking, veterans affairs, family resources, broadband and tax issues, made a special effort to honor the veterans in the room and give them an update on HB 36, a bill that would alleviate property tax woes for veteran services organizations.

“We appreciate you all coming out in support of that bill,” Miles said. “It is an appropriation, and it will more than likely, as we get into the budget stages of the session, begin to move quite a bit. We are watching for that, and we are happy to see you all here.”

Miles also focused a great deal on HB 1 and its benefits to the commonwealth as a whole.

“We hear it often at the state and the federal level that the concern of losing benefits to opportunities for a better life is a cliff,” she said. “It is like if you get a raise, you may lose your Medicaid card or health insurance. House Bill 1 is very specific in the process of bridging that gap and supporting those working their way to getting to the point of being self-sufficient without benefits. That is the goal with this. It is a very humane effort, more than I have ever seen before. Another feature of this is substance abuse, this bill is specific that in the event that substance abuse is found to be a problem or if you are charged with an item under that category, it is mandatory that you enroll in treatment. We are trying to encourage people that we will help them and not pull the rug out from under them.”

The bill also lays out protections for children who receive benefits and protects their benefits in the instance that their guardian may be at risk of losing theirs, she said.

Glenn, who is involved in legislation spanning voting, medicine, discrimination, as well as mental health, took his time to discuss the issue most near and dear to him — education, he said.

“Education, technology and growth in population is what is needed to grow any economy any place in the world,” he said. “We’d do well to invest our money in education, and we are not doing that. We have to invest in our children if we are to survive. One issue we need to focus on and that was brought to my attention was increased mental health services on the college level. I never thought that was a problem at a college. There is a lot going on in our society that is stressing people out. We need to ensure that these people have the help and services that they need prosper and heal.”

While the general sentiment of the legislators in attendance was positive, from here on out until the session ends on April 16, it will be a breakneck sprint to get bills through and finalize a budget that does what it needs to do to ensure new and existing programs can aid the GRADD region and the commonwealth as a whole.

For more information or to track bills introduced in the 2020 General Assembly visit legislature.ky.gov.

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