

Half way home

Deb Merle

That bill does what now?

As we pass the midway point in session, legislators in both chambers work feverishly to get their bills out of the Rules Committee and to the floor for a vote by March 11th. That's the last day for bills to get out of their House of Origin if they are to be considered in the opposite house. Of course bills can always be revived, but it does make it more difficult when they fail to hit the big procedural milestones.

In order to keep their bills moving, prime sponsors often agree to make significant changes at this stage in the process. Bills that went into fiscal committees with big fiscal notes were whittled down a lot, if they were voted out at all. Lots of grand ideas and big initiatives became work groups and pilot programs, "shalls" became "mays," and phrases like, "if funds are appropriated" and, "null and void without funding" appeared in many bills before they got to the Rules committee or before they left the floor.

What about the budgets?

Although the budget writers in the House and Senate are talking privately about the budget, public debates are unlikely until the House releases its version of the 2015-17 operating budget in mid-March. The Capital Budget is not typically discussed publicly in earnest until much later in the session. Transportation was up in the Senate this week as they passed a 12 cent per gallon gas tax to fund projects all over the state. House leadership does not plan to take up the Transportation Budget right away.

The 50th anniversary of the federal Voting Rights Act

On Wednesday afternoon, the Senate celebrated the 50th anniversary of the passage of the federal Voting Rights Act. It was a stirring tribute and legislators from both sides of the aisle spoke about the importance of the Act to the fabric of our democracy. Afterward, Senator Liias made a motion for the body to move to the 9th order of business and vote on SB 5668, the Washington Voting Rights Act. The 9th order is an obscure Senate rule that allows a majority of members to bring bills from any committee, directly to the floor for a vote.

Moving to the 9th order is tricky because once you do it, bills can come from any committee whether they were heard or voted on or not, and a majority of the Senate has to vote to end the fun. That's why the Republicans and two Democrats waited until the last minute (literally) a few years ago when they took control from the Democrat majority to pass a budget on the Senate floor. That move came just before the 5:00 adjournment on the last possible day (and may have planted seeds for a coalition to come). But, I digress.

Senator Liias' motion to bring Senator Habib's bill out of the Rules committee and to the floor for a vote did not garner a majority on Wednesday. The next morning however, its companion bill, HB 1745 sponsored by Representative Moscoso, was pulled from House Rules via the normal route. After a full debate and a series of amendments (which failed on party lines), the bill was voted out of the House 52-46. A little while later, during his weekly media availability, Governor Inslee expressed support for the bill calling it, "an appropriate way to give more minority communities a chance to have some representation on elected bodies."

See the WSSDA [Bill Watch List](#) and annotated [Hearing Schedule](#) for a complete list of bills we're tracking and committee meetings of particular interest next week.

Have fun next week!