

What you need to know about the 2015-2016 Interim Session

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The Montana Legislature is generally viewed as two chambers that meet for about four months every two years. While this is true, the commitment of each legislator extends far beyond those 90 working days. The Interim comprises of special committees that meet periodically throughout the non-Session months. This process is one of the best ways for stakeholders to engage with their elected officials on issues that will likely drive the conversation during the next Session.

A lot has taken place during the 2015-2016 Interim in Helena. As your 24/7/365 business advocate, the Montana Chamber monitors and participates in these committee hearings to better serve you. We have identified several relevant interim committee actions based on hearings dating back to Spring 2015:

Economic Affairs (ETIC):

- ETIC filed bill draft requests that address “active supervision” over licensing boards. Proposed bills would limit the authority of licensing boards that consider anticompetitive actions, establish antitrust panels, and require the Department of Labor and Industry to notify licensing boards of such activity;
- ETIC also submitted two proposals addressing air ambulance services. They include a provision to hold harmless from balance billing an insured patient served by an air ambulance provider, a dispute resolution process for air ambulance and insurance providers, and regulation of air ambulance memberships.

Education and Local Government (ELGIC):

- ELGIC discussed workers’ compensation legislation for volunteer firefighters. Funded by a percentage of fire insurance premium tax revenues, a cost-share assistance program would allow volunteer fire departments to purchase work comp coverage.

Energy and Telecommunications (ETIC):

- ETIC approved five net metering bills for submission as draft requests. Three of the drafts focus on interconnection requirements and metering technology. The other two address broader net metering policy issues and were amended by the committee before moving forward.
- ETIC also approved remediation proposals regarding the closing of Colstrip Units 1 and 2. Of the seven bill drafts, the most discussed was LCCOL 5 “Establish the Montana Energy Accountability Act.” This bill would charge the two out-of-state plant lessees \$3 million a year for the first five years after shutdown, plus the full amount of property and licensing taxes they would have paid had the plant remained operational.

Revenue and Transportation (RTIC):

- RTIC submitted three bill proposals that would adjust tax increment financing (TIF) in Montana. They amend laws related to remittance and reporting requirements, and remove certain levies from TIF;
- The Legislative Fiscal Division (LFD) and the Office of Budget and Program Planning presented their general fund revenue estimates for FY 2017-2019. Each department’s estimates are very similar, with no more than a 1.3% difference for a given year.

Water Policy (WPIC):

- WPIC moved several proposals forward during the Interim, including bills to direct the DEQ to assume dredge-and-fill permitting, revise temporary water lease laws, and allow water court review of certain DNRC decisions.

Legislative Finance Committee (LFC):

- The LFD reported that total general fund revenues for FY 2016 were \$141.5 million (6.3%) below expectations. Revenue collections in FY 2017 will be an estimated \$112 million below projections;
- The ending general fund balance for FY 2017 is \$118.6 million. Last year, the ending fund balance was about \$255 million;
- Administrators delivered a progress report on the HELP Act's implementation. Of interest to the Montana Chamber is the HELP-Link assessment that matches beneficiaries with employment training and job search services. 6,000 people have completed the assessment, but only 1,400 of them have continued participating in the program. The HELP Oversight Committee is working on ways to reduce that drop-off.

The Montana Legislature publishes a monthly newsletter, *The Interim*, that reviews the above activity and more. Archived editions can be found at <http://leg.mt.gov/css/publications/Interim-Newsletter/default.asp>.