

## Better Times Produce Less Contentious Budget Debate

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The SC House passed its version of the 2005-2006 budget last week. What a relief to be able to report to my constituents that the first budget during my tenure as your Representative is, overall, a good budget and reflects the improving fiscal condition of our state. Persons with an institutional memory state that this is the first time in their recollection that the budget has passed the House on second reading unanimously, and in a record two-day period.

While there are many facets to the roughly \$5.2 billion dollar budget, I would like to outline a few that should be of interest to citizens of Kershaw County. Under the House budget:

- State employees will receive a 4 percent pay increase; in addition, there will be no premium increase for health insurance for the upcoming fiscal year.
- Law enforcement officers — including SLED agents, corrections officers, highway patrol, and wildlife officers — will receive an overall 10 percent pay increase.
- The Department of Public Safety will receive funds for 100 new troopers and 220 new cars.
- The Department of Corrections will have funds to hire 124 new officers with vehicles for each officer.
- The State Library's base budget will be supplemented to increase the Aid to County Libraries from \$0.82 to \$2.00 per capita.
- Some \$10 million in funds will be provided for local government grants. These grants are for economic development, such as water and sewer projects and service expansion projects, for local communities throughout the state.

The budgeting process for public education has been for the most part very positive. The good news to report is that the House budget:

- Continues to fund teachers' salaries at \$300 above the Southeastern average and the teacher supply money will be increased to \$250 per teacher, up from \$200.
- Maintains the full National Board Certification salary supplement and funds the required amount for new teachers entering the program.
- Provides \$18 million in new funding for school buses.
- Fully funds LIFE, HOPE, and Palmetto Fellows Scholarships.

I would like to say unequivocally that the House budget fully funds the Education Finance Act (EFA) base student cost; but I can't without explanation. During the past several years, there has been mounting political pressure to fully fund the EFA "base student cost." Many boast that this budget accomplishes this goal. The goal is achieved, however, at the expense of several programs. The Governor has used the term "backpacked" for programs that will no longer be individually funded by the State, but for which the schools may individually decide to contract. Without direct state funding, it is unlikely that local counties will choose to fund some or all of these programs. These "backpacked" programs include \$13.9 million of the Technology Initiative, part-time employee health and dental insurance, school resource officers, and funding for drug and alcohol abuse programs.

In addition, the budget suspends for the next budget year the Education Improvement Act (EIA) local maintenance of effort and the Education Finance Act (EFA) local match requirement. The suspension of these requirements will make budgeting tricky for school districts that do not have or have limited fiscal autonomy, such as the Kershaw County School District. While the House budget fulfills the State's funding obligations, school districts that do not have independent revenue authority may not find county councils willing to provide funding at the same levels they have in years past. I do not believe in unfunded mandates; however, to remove the mandate without first restructuring the system is clearly an instance of "putting the cart before the horse."

While I am glad to see so many improvements in the public education budget, I find it difficult to say that all's well when many school districts' local funding has been placed into doubt and when many counties may not be able to afford school resource officers.

Admirably, the House budget fully restores 40 trust funds and partially restores the Barnwell Nuclear Clean-up Fund and the Insurance Reserve Fund. This trust fund money was taken out in tough budget times to supplement the General Fund. I am glad to see it put back. I hope that we can fully restore the remaining funds in the near future.

Of particular interest to our area is a \$50,000.00 provision to help fund the operation of Second Chances, a Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation program at Wateree Correctional Institution. The reality of this worthy program is due to the collaboration of retired warden John Carmichael, Corrections Director Jon Ozmint, private citizen John Rainey, and Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation S.C. Chapter President Kip Elser.

The House budget now goes to the Senate for approval. Ultimately, a joint conference committee will work out the final version to be approved by both the Senate and the House and presented to the Governor.

If you would like any additional information on the budget, or any other legislation under consideration by the General Assembly, please visit our website at

[www.scstatehouse.net](http://www.scstatehouse.net). If you have a comment or opinion concerning the matters discussed in this report, or if I may be of assistance to you at any time, please call your legislative office in Columbia (803-734-3044); or my office in Camden (803-432-0188); or write Post Office Box 188, Camden, SC 29020. Again, thank you for the opportunity to serve you in the House of Representatives.