

Manchin dislikes teacher pension plan – 2/29

By Scott Finn

With about a week to go in the session, Gov. Joe Manchin says he's not happy with a House proposal on pensions for school employees.

The House wants to spend up to \$78M to help school employees switch from the ailing 401-K-style plan to the state-managed pension plan. Manchin wants the 19,000 school employees who change plans to pay more of the burden.

Manchin says that some school employees received bad advice on their investments, but he says it's not fair for taxpayers to bear so much of the burden.

Other retirees have lost their pension plan because their company went bankrupt, and still others made poor investment decisions in their 401-K plan – but the state is not jumping in to help them, he said.

Manchin says he does support a proposed pay raise for lawmakers, from \$15,000 to \$20,000 a year. He said it's necessary to attract "new blood" to the body.

Manchin says he hasn't decided whether he supports Senate Bill 600, which would add gays and lesbians to the state Human Rights Act.

Manchin also wants to protect more than 300 streams from pollution by naming them "Tier 2.5" waterways. Environmentalists and industry have fought for years over how many streams to put on the list.

But Wednesday night, Senate Judiciary Chairman Jeff Kessler sponsored an amendment that did away with the Tier 2.5 designation for streams.

Kessler says that no one seemed happy with the so-called Tier 2.5 "compromise" and that after almost a decade of debate, only one stream has made the list.

If Kessler's bill passes, all streams would have to be categorized as either Tier 3, which receive even greater protection from pollution, or Tier 2, which receives less.

And Manchin had another bill dealing with streams. Senate Bill 390 would have named more than 300 new trout streams in the state. But the Senate Judiciary Committee killed that part of the bill by a 10-4 vote earlier this week, with only Senators Foster, Hunter, Kessler, and White voting to increase the number of trout streams.

The Senate also has passed a bill to allow counties in the southern coalfields to receive 5 percent of the coal severance taxes they generate. Senate Minority Leader Truman Chafin says these counties are mineral rich, but surface poor.

The Legislature would control how the money is spent. It would be for seniors, infrastructure, and other needs. That bill now goes to the House.

The Senate is now dealing with bills passed by the House, and one in particular seems to be on the fast track: House Bill 4076, which gives lawmakers a \$5,000 pay increase and increases how much money they receive for expenses. That bill is expected to pass the Senate by the end of this week.

Finally, lawmakers took time from their busy schedule Wednesday to pay tribute to Bob Gould, a 48-year-old Republican activist who died last year from cancer. Senators Donna Boley, Chafin, Vic Sprouse, and Jon Unger all paid tribute.