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Capitol Report from Senator Torrey Westrom

Dear Friends,

This week at the Capitol was busy with meetings, events, and extended committees. Committee hearings are heating up over tough issues. Three of the top issues being discussed by legislators at the Minnesota State Capitol include privacy concerns with automated license plate readers. “Your School, Your Needs” education package, and condemning religious persecution worldwide.

I have had the privilege of welcoming a number of groups for their Day at the Capitol. These groups included the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), MN Home Care agencies, Stearns County Township Officers, MN Insurance Counsel, MN License Beverage Association (MLBA), Minnesota Association for College Admission Counseling (MACAC), MAAP STARS Students, AFSCME CO 65, and the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries (“ISRI”).

As always, it is an honor to represent Western Minnesota at the Minnesota State Capitol. Please, do not hesitate to contact me with any legislative thoughts, comments or concerns.

Sincerely,

Torrey

Week in Pictures



Township Lobby Day's Joint Meeting with Legislators

Township Officers from Renville, Meeker, Pope, Stearns, and Kandiyohi came to the Capitol for their Township Lobby Day. Officers joined legislators for a joint meeting where they were able to raise awareness for concerns and ask questions about important legislative issues.

MAAP STARS 2015 Legislative Day at the Capitol

Sen. Westrom welcomed MAAP STARS students from Paynesville, Albany, Melrose and Sauk Centre during their 2015 Legislative Day at the Capitol. Students were given the opportunity to learn about the legislative process and meet with their legislators to inform them about MAAP STARS programs. Check out their homepage for more information:
<http://www.maapmn.org/pages/MAAPSTARS/>



Local High Schooler Joins Page Program at the Capitol

This week, Sen. Westrom congratulated Austin, a local high school student from Brandon, MN, on his acceptance to the 2015 High School Page Program at the Minnesota House of Representatives. The program provides Minnesota's future leaders with hands-on access to legislators and experience working with the state government in action.



Legislative Update

License Plate Readers Held Up In Committee Over Privacy Concerns – A new technology to identify stolen cars is producing major controversy at the Minnesota State Capitol. On Wednesday, the Senate Committee on Transportation and Public Safety heard Senate File 86, also known as the “Automatic License Plate Reader” bill, which authorizes law enforcement to retain drivers’ information for a period of 90 days.

The retention period is the source of the controversy, with legislators and data privacy advocates raising concerns over the infringement on the privacy of average, law-abiding citizens. Automatic license plate reader technology not only collects license plates; it also tracks time, date, and location of the license plate at the time of collection.

“Whether or not you have done anything wrong, you are under surveillance,” said Sen. Torrey Westrom (R-Elbow Lake). “Your personal information is available to law enforcement for 90 days (and sometimes longer), even if you have not committed any crime, and it may be used in criminal investigations.”

Gun Owners Civil Rights Alliance (GOCRA) is one of the groups concerned with the retention provision. They have said there is nothing stopping law enforcement from collecting data on hundreds or even thousands of cars outside political rallies, churches, mosques, or gun shows. Law Enforcement officers are free to share personal information of Minnesotans with federal agencies – agencies that have no legal obligation under Minnesota law to protect the data.

To address these data privacy concerns, Senate Republicans introduced a “Zero Day Retention” bill that would eliminate the retention period. Senate File 31, authored by Sen. Branden Petersen (R-Ham Lake), allows for automatic license plate readers to be used by law enforcement, but restricts the data from being stored for any length of time.

“License plate readers are not inherently destructive, but the data collected needs to be more heavily regulated,” continued Sen. Westrom. “Sen. Petersen’s bill strikes a balance between the privacy rights of individuals and law enforcement’s ability to utilize this technology to apprehend criminals.”

Automatic license plate reader technology allows law enforcement to preprogram license plates of stolen cars into their system. The reader then collects plate numbers and automatically runs the numbers against the list of stolen cars. When there is a match, law enforcement is notified in real time. This has proven very effective at recovering and restoring stolen vehicles.

Automatic license plate readers streamline and automate what law enforcement officers have done for decades. This technology also has the capability of scanning for missing persons, warrants, and terrorists. It can more accurately identify possible suspects, rule out innocent people, and expands investigative capabilities of agencies.

“Your School, Your Needs” Education Package – Minnesota Senate Republicans proposed a unique education funding idea today that will send a burst of funding to K-12 schools outside the normal funding formulas. The “Your School, Your Needs” funding can be used for any local initiative to improve education and comes without any new mandates or strings attached.

“The ‘Your School, Your Needs’ funding would be allocated based on a pure per-student formula, eliminating the current inequities built into today’s complicated education funding formulas,” said Sen. Sean Nienow, the chief author of the proposal.

The “Your School, Your Needs” legislation includes \$175 per student for 2016 and an additional \$180 per student for 2017 to be allocated as “basic needs revenue” which may be deposited into a special reserve account for every school district. The bill also frees school districts from any new mandates passed during the 2015 and 2016 legislative sessions.

“Education is delivered at the local level and it’s time we allow parents, teachers and school board members the freedom and the money to innovate,” said Sen. Eric Pratt (R-Prior Lake). “Every school district has an idea they would like to implement if only they had the money and the freedom – this bill allows for hundreds of unique education reforms across the state.”

The new funding represents a 3% increase in each of the upcoming two school years. In contrast, Governor Dayton proposed only 1% in his budget announcement, and the Senate DFL offered no new money for the classroom in their February 4th education press conference.

Lawmakers and faith leaders take stand for religious freedom – On Monday, a bipartisan group of legislators joined with leaders of various religious faiths to denounce religious persecution around the globe. The group introduced Senate File 15, a resolution asking President Obama and Governor Dayton to take additional steps to raise awareness for the subject and make religious freedom a higher priority.

We are fortunate to live in a country where we are mostly free of religious violence. It’s easy to forget how lucky we are. Around the world, people of faith are more and more often being subjected to discrimination, violence, and even death for no other reason than their religious beliefs. The most recent in a long list of examples is the murder of 21 Coptic Christians in Egypt.

The U.S. State Department reported that in 2013, the world witnessed the largest displacement of religious communities in recent memory. According to Pew Research, Christians face persecution in 151 countries – more than any other religious group. Christians are the only religious group at risk in each of the 16 worst countries for religious persecution.

I am proud that members of so many religious faiths are united in this common goal. We have a responsibility to use our offices and our positions to loudly condemn all forms of religious persecution. While this resolution is non-binding, I am hopeful it will continue the conversation about the importance of securing religious freedom around the world.

As always, please contact Senator Torrey Westrom by phone at 651-296-3826 or toll free at 855-407-7386, by email at sen.torrey.westrom@senate.mn, or by mail at 107 State Office Building, 100 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd, St. Paul, MN 55155.

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