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SENATE DEMOCRATIC CAUCUS

NEWS RELEASE

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Week in Review at the Indiana General Assembly State Senator Sue Errington, D-Muncie

INDIANAPOLIS—Committee agendas were full this week as the General Assembly worked through mid-session deadlines for committee hearings on bills in their house of origin. Approved measures advance to the full House and Senate where members have until next week to vote on bills introduced in their respective chambers. This brief summary highlights some of the legislative action and other activities which took place at the Statehouse this week.

Arts organizations and conservationists have day at the Statehouse

Advocates for the arts met at the Statehouse this week to showcase Indiana Arts organizations and present community arts leadership awards. In coordination with the Indiana Coalition for the Arts and the Indiana Arts Commission (IAC), regional representatives, artists, educators and administrators met with their respective legislators throughout the day to encourage continued public funding of the arts and recognize the economic importance of the arts. According to a 2008 survey, the IAC reported that there were 8,905 arts-related businesses in Indiana employing an estimated 53,924 Hoosiers.

In addition, the Indiana Conservation Alliance, consisting of about 30 conservation groups from around the state, assembled at the Statehouse this week to promote Conservation Day 2010. For the sixth year in a row, alliance members met with numerous lawmakers to promote their issues and encourage the passage of legislation to protect Indiana's natural resources and preserve the environment.

Redistricting - An amendment was offered in the Senate this week to [Senate Bill \(SB\) 80](#) that would establish an independent commission to study and make recommendations for new legislative district maps for review by the next General Assembly. The proposal would not require an amendment to the state constitution and could take effect immediately impacting the 2011 redistricting process. The amendment was defeated along party lines in the Republican-controlled chamber by a vote of 16-33. Republicans have held control of the State Senate since 1978. Similar language is included in [SB 289](#) which did not receive a Senate committee hearing. In addition, [SB 136](#) is moving through the process and would create a redistricting committee to study proposals on amending the state constitution to allow redistricting by an independent commission. However, this legislation would delay any reform of the current process until 2021 at the earliest. Currently, 20 states have commissions that have the primary responsibility of drawing new districts or function as an advisory body on redistricting matters.

Smoking cessation program – A Senate amendment **supported by Errington** that would have protected the state's Tobacco Use Prevention and Cessation (TPC) Board met with defeat this week. Under [SB 298](#) as currently written, the nationally-recognized program is at risk of losing its autonomy and being put in the hands of the State Department of Health as a cost-savings measure for the state, even though the board is currently funded through the Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement Trust Fund and not the state's general fund. The board is appropriated \$10.9 million annually, of which \$1 million is spent on administrative costs and the balance supports about 200 local community tobacco use prevention and cessation programs. Recognized as a leader in tobacco control and a national model, the TPC's mission includes preventing tobacco use by Indiana youth, assisting tobacco users in quitting, assisting with the reduction and protection from secondhand smoke, and emphasizing prevention and reduction of tobacco

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use by minorities, pregnant women, children and other at-risk populations. Indiana has the second highest smoking rate in the country next to West Virginia costing Hoosiers over \$2 billion each year in health care costs directly related to tobacco use.

Agricultural land assessments - Members of the Senate Tax and Fiscal Policy Committee advanced [SB 396](#) to the full Senate this week to require the Department of Local Government Finance to use an adjusted six year average and eliminate the highest and lowest values determined for that period when making the annual calculation of the base rate for the assessment of agricultural land. Known as the "Olympic Average" technique in which outlier scores are disqualified, passage of this bill would provide farmers and local governments more stable agricultural property assessments with slower growth and slower declines that are likely to be more representative of true market value. **Supported by Errington** and other members of the Indiana Rural Caucus as well as the Indiana Farm Bureau, this formula would more accurately reflect the values of farmland and properties used by the state's agricultural industries, and better protect Indiana's farmers and agricultural communities.

Local and organic food industry – A bill **authored by Errington** that would encourage the expansion of Indiana's local and organic food production got a hearing this week. During the hearing, the senator suggested that she would instead work to expand a similar program under the Office of Community and Rural Affairs and eliminate the cost of a new task force called for in the bill. The new plan would require a comprehensive report of the existing program's impact and findings be sent to the legislature to inform policymakers on how best to expand and modernize Indiana's local and organic food network. Doing this now would help this industry to move forward during better economic times.

Texting and driving don't mix - The House Public Policy Committee unanimously approved a bill that would ban texting while driving for all Indiana drivers. [House Bill \(HB\) 1279](#) provides that anyone who uses a telecommunications device to transmit a text message or electronic mail message while operating a moving motor vehicle would commit a Class C infraction, which carries a maximum fine of \$500. The bill now advances to the full House for further consideration. Legislatures in 23 states are considering legislation to restrict texting while driving. Nineteen states and the District of Columbia already have enacted laws that ban texting for all drivers. Ten states, including Indiana, ban texting for teen drivers only. Also this week, the federal government enacted an immediate ban on the use of handheld devices by interstate truckers and operators of vehicles carrying at least eight passengers. Violators will face penalties of up to \$2,750.

Upcoming Senate deadlines

February 1	Deadline for senators to amend Senate bills
February 2	Deadline for senators to vote on Senate bills
February 8	Senate begins review of House-passed bills

To stay informed about legislation moving through the General Assembly or to track legislation, log on to www.in.gov/legislative/. This site provides complete bill information as well as committee hearing dates and agendas. From this site, you can also tune in to House and Senate floor debate as well as some committee hearings. Citizens can stay current on legislation scheduled for action through a free online program available at www.BillWatch.in.gov. Track up to ten bills and receive e-mail notifications only when action is taken on those bills.

Visit my Senate web site at www.in.gov/s26 and subscribe to receive periodic e-mails about the major issues facing us this year. The Senate Democrats are also providing multimedia updates on the daily activities in the Senate at [The Briefing Room](#) and Twitter updates at [INSenDems](#). Personal contact with constituents has a direct impact on the legislation we consider and what ultimately becomes law. Feel free to contact me with your concerns regarding pending legislation or if I can provide any assistance.

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