

Arizona Capitol Times

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“Let's be clear. Gov. Hobbs didn't create these tax cuts — she's trying to take a victory lap on the GOP's work.”

— Senate Finance Committee Chairman Sen. J.D. Mesnard, R-Chandler, in a November statement criticizing Gov. Katie Hobbs for allegedly taking credit for the middle-class tax cuts enacted under the federal H.R. 1.

Capitol Quotes on page 2

Pressure mounts at Capitol to extend Proposition 123

BY KIERA RILEY
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The debate surrounding Proposition 123, the now-lapsed education funding mechanism drawing dollars from the state land trust fund, has reemerged as a slow scramble to compromise this session.

What's more, there is no complete plan from the Republican majority, Democrats, the governor or the broad spectrum of education groups on how to continue funding raises for Arizona's teachers.

After two sessions of false starts and stalls, lawmakers and stakeholders have yet to fully reconvene on Prop. 123, all while pressure to pass some type of extension rises.

A projected budget deficit, a court judgment requiring further school facilities funding and finger-pointing at the now \$1 billion Empowerment Scholarship Account

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Ringling in the new hot topics for the legislative session



Gov. Katie Hobbs delivers the State of the State address at the state Capitol, Monday, Jan. 8, 2024, in Phoenix. (AP Photo/Ross D. Franklin)

BY JORDAN GERARD
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The oncoming legislative session will bring new topics to the halls of the Arizona Legislature, alongside some familiar ones.

The *Arizona Capitol Times* asked leaders from both parties what lingering topics remain and which new

and shiny prospects will be introduced.

The biggest topic that repeats year to year and looms over the session is the state budget, but this year, tax conformity and the federal government's H.R. 1, also known as the "Big Beautiful Bill," have continued to complicate discussions.

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Gov. Katie Hobbs: Affordability, education and water in 2026

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CAPITOL QUOTES



"If Pete Hegseth, the most unqualified Secretary of Defense in our country's history, thinks he can intimidate me with a censure or threats to demote me or prosecute me, he still doesn't get it. I will fight this with everything I've got — not for myself, but to send a message back that Pete Hegseth and Donald Trump don't get to decide what Americans in this country get to say about their government."

— Sen. Mark Kelly, D-Ariz., on his potential military demotion and censure after posting a video online encouraging military personnel to disobey unlawful orders.



"Both fierce advocates of Make America Great Again, Jay and Gina have been with us from the very beginning, and either one would be an incredible Representative who would work tirelessly to Grow our Economy, Cut Taxes and Regulations, Promote MADE IN THE U.S.A., Champion American Energy DOMINANCE, Keep our now very Secure Border, SECURE, Stop Migrant Crime, Strengthen our Military/Veterans, and Defend our always under siege Second Amendment."

— President Donald Trump, endorsing both Gina Swoboda and Jay Feely in the competitive race for Arizona's 1st Congressional District.



"I believe in my heart of hearts that the majority of SNAP payments that McDonald's and Jack in the Box are getting are from regular folks who use SNAP who have homes."

— Rep. Teresa Martinez, R-Casa Grande, on the value of the state's food stamps program and her rejection of potential new restrictions.



"It really underlines how Republican policies of just simply tax exempting your way into growth can really lead to major crises, and here we are now with explosive data centers that are keeping our state from having the tax revenues that we need to pay for the services that we need to provide everyone."

— Sen. Priya Sundareshan, D-Tucson, on the new push to remove tax incentives for data centers within Arizona.

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Arizona Capitol Times

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Arizona Capitol Times (ISSN 0744-7477) is published weekly, with one additional special issue at year end, at Phoenix, Maricopa County, Arizona by State Affairs Inc.

Subscriptions:

To subscribe, visit www.pro.stateaffairs.com.

Postmaster:

Send all address changes to:

Arizona Capitol Times
1001 N. Central Ave., Phoenix, AZ 85004, Suite 801

Periodicals postage paid at Phoenix, Arizona.

For customer service and subscription updates:

Call (602) 258-7026
or contact mengelmann@stateaffairs.com

To contact the newsrooms:

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A photograph of Arizona Governor Katie Hobbs speaking at a podium. She has long, wavy grey hair and is wearing black-rimmed glasses and a bright orange blazer over a black top. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background is dark and out of focus.**GOV. KATIE HOBBS**

Affordability, education and water in 2026

BY REAGAN PRIEST
rpriest@stateaffairs.com

Gov. Katie Hobbs is entering her fourth and final legislative session of her first term — and an election year that could decide whether she gets another term — with a focus on affordability, education and the Colorado River. The governor sat down with the *Arizona Capitol Times* ahead of the session's Jan. 12 opening day to discuss her priorities.

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*Questions and answers have been lightly edited
for style and clarity*

Arizona Gov. Katie Hobbs speaks at a campaign event for Democratic presidential nominee Vice President Kamala Harris at Talking Stick Resort Amphitheatre, Oct. 31, 2024. (AP Photo/Matt York, File)

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

Gov. Katie Hobbs: Affordability, education and water in 2026

What issues absolutely need to be addressed this session?

So Proposition 123 renewal, that's a priority for me. I know there's a lot of education folks in the community who consider it a priority, and it seems to be emerging as a priority for the Republicans as well, especially given our challenging budget situation. It's a way to just give more dollars to our public schools that need it without costing taxpayers anything. What I hear from Arizonans, and thankfully, it sounds like Republicans have gotten the message too, is that we need to do what we can to lower costs. So you'll hear more about proposals for that in my agenda, and hopefully, there's a lot of room to work with Republicans on those things. And then, potentially (we) will need legislative approval of a deal that gets done ... on the Colorado River post-2026.

Where do negotiations stand on Prop. 123?

I haven't been directly involved yet, so I don't have specifics on that. Given our budget situation, I can't imagine wanting to leave money on the table that's going to help fund public schools, especially given that (Republicans) haven't been willing to make any reforms to the now-billion dollar (Empowerment Scholarship Accounts) entitlement program.

Will you, once again, propose guardrails for the ESA program?

Absolutely, and I hope this is the year that Republicans decide it's time to take action to bring some accountability there. We've seen through multiple different reports that it is a program that is ripe with abuse and fraud, and so far from the original intent of helping kids with disabilities and failing schools that I don't know how they keep defending it.

Affordability is top of mind for all lawmakers this year. What is your office proposing to address it?

The first thing, and I hope it's the first bill that the Legislature sends me, is middle-class tax cuts, the pieces of conformity with the federal tax cuts that will benefit most Arizonans right now as they're beginning to file their taxes. So the greater

standard deduction, the tax exemption on overtime and tips, a senior tax credit. Those are the things I included in my executive order, and I think they will provide immediate relief to Arizonans. I know the Republicans very likely want to do full conformity. I think both these tax cuts and the full conformity come with a big price tag, and we need to negotiate how that's going to be paid for in the budget, the piece for corporations and the wealthy.

Republicans have proposed a special session on tax conformity. Have there been any more conversations on that?

If it makes sense to do a special session, sure, but there's no reason we can't just do it in regular session with an emergency clause, so that it goes into effect right away.

This year will be a difficult budget year. How are you planning to address the shortfalls caused by federal spending and tax cuts?

It was challenging to craft this year's budget, given the cuts we know are coming and those that have already been put in place. I'm actually really proud of the budget, which we're going to present that is balanced, that continues to invest in important areas for Arizonans and addresses some of the affordability challenges we know Arizonans are facing. You'll hear more details on Monday, and see them next Friday. But we've proposed specifically the Arizona Affordability Fund and a housing acceleration fund to build more affordable housing. So those are two of the things I think will really help Arizonans with their energy bills, and then getting more housing built for sure.

What are you hoping to accomplish on groundwater conservation this year?

One of the things that we're proposing is a water usage fee on data centers, and that will create a fund to really supercharge some of the conservation efforts that will need to happen. We're looking at the possibility of another (active management area) in La Paz County. So more to come on that. And I

think the Colorado River is really going to dominate the water conversation this year, but I know that we're going to continue to see rural leaders pushing for more rural groundwater reform.

You're also looking at ending tax incentives for data centers. Can you talk more about that?

I think we just have to find the right balance. We, as a state, made a strategic decision to incentivize data centers. We've done that really well. We're the top two markets in the world for data centers. And there are concerns about water use, concerns about energy usage, and concerns in communities. You saw a very contentious vote in Chandler and a previously contentious vote in Tucson. So we need to strike the right balance. And I think ending the tax incentive is the right way to do that. We're not telling cities what they can or can't do. And I think you see bipartisan support for doing that.

You have eight agency nominees awaiting confirmation. Are you confident they will be confirmed this session?

Our staff has continued to reach out to

Sen. (Jake) Hoffman, and had some good conversations. That could be meaningless. I've nominated qualified people who are willing to put themselves out there as public servants to run these state agencies that provide important services to Arizonans, and I will continue to fight for them. We are working with them to prepare for contentious hearings. And (Department of Environmental Quality) Director (Karen) Peters went through (the committee) last year, hopefully they'll get her through Senate confirmation early on.

Republicans will try, and have already tried, to make this session about your reelection campaign. How will you stay focused?

There's always going to be political distractions, whether it's an election year or not, and I've always tried to just stay focused on what I think is the right thing for Arizonans. Going back to where I started, everyone's getting the message that affordability is an issue, and so I think there's a lot of opportunity to find common ground there. And it's not just an issue in Arizona, it's an issue nationally, and I am laser-focused on ways that we can do that at the state level.

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There's always going to be political distractions, whether it's an election year or not, and I've always tried to just stay focused on what I think is the right thing for Arizonans.

Gov. Katie Hobbs

CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE

Ring in the new hot topics for the legislative session

Senate Majority Leader John Kavanagh, R-Fountain Hills, said the total cost of conformity with federal tax cuts is about \$440 million, and lawmakers can't make headway on the state budget until they decide what to do with conformity.

"In the end, we might not do full conformity, but even only doing half conformity, which would be the personal income tax, we're still finding ourselves scraping around for a few hundred million," Kavanagh said.

Senate President Warren Petersen, R-Queen Creek, said Republicans want to pass the H.R. 1 tax cuts onto Arizona citizens, but everybody needs to get on the same page.

It seems everyone agrees that it will be a challenge to address the changes from H.R. 1, as Senate Minority Leader Priya Sundareshan, D-Tucson, pointed out that determining priorities will add to that challenge.

"The challenge now will be figuring out what is available for the state and how do we make sure that we continue to fund everything that is a priority for the state, as well as what Arizona is legally and constitutionally mandated to support and provide," she said.

Water takes second spotlight at the Capitol

Fresh off the Colorado River Water Users Association conference in Las Vegas in December, water is the second biggest issue taking the spotlight at the Capitol. Lawmakers recognize that the state might receive less water in the future, given its status as a junior rights state and the need for a new agreement.

"We're always offering more, getting less, but we want to make sure that we negotiate a fair deal where all of the states are participating in any possible cuts to the Colorado River," Petersen said.

Sundareshan said the water issue is close to her heart. She said she'll continue her quest to make sure the state is managing its groundwater resources in the best and most conservation oriented way possible, because those resources are finite.

"Unfortunately, we do have a lot of gaps in our groundwater management across the state," she said. "It's even more important that we have our hands and heads wrapped around and protective of our groundwater resources."

Kavanagh said people will see a lot of talk on the Colorado River water shortages and the increased siphoning of water from some rural aquifers, which will eventually result in a crisis.

AI and data centers topic will be more prominent

Artificial Intelligence and data centers were said to be the shiny new topics, with all three Senate leaders mentioning aspects of both.

Kavanagh said data centers are kind of interesting from a conservative Republican standpoint.

"I'm really grateful that they're here," he said. "I

KEY POINTS

- **Cities seek update to law restricting short-term rental licenses**
- **Previous bills to regulate short-term rentals have largely gone unheard**
- **Airbnb contributed \$3.5 billion to Arizona's economy through its hosts**

mean, beyond needing that technology, both for national security and so people can use ChatGPT to make funny illustrations of their friends, it has totally kneecapped the green environmental movement.

Kavanagh added that proponents of that movement realized the electricity demand is massive because of the AI programs that people really want and businesses and universities also need it.

Concerns about regulating AI while also protecting people's rights to create and produce were at the top of Petersen's mind. He said potential legislation might require disclaimers for AI products if people can't tell whether they're real.

"We certainly don't want the public to be misled and thinking something is real, that's not real, especially if it's a substantive issue that may affect their decision-making or elections," he said.

The sales tax exemption for data center equipment passed about 13 years ago and Sundareshan said no one ever thought it would get "this big" and be so explosive.

"It really underlines how Republican policies of just simply tax exempting your way into growth can really lead to major crises, and here we are now with explosive data centers that are keeping our state from having the tax revenues that we need to pay for the services that we need to provide everyone," she said.

Key issues that Senate leaders are looking forward to

Beyond these topics, there is the excitement for a new legislative season with a mid-term election year.

Kavanagh said he's looking forward to another political season with good legislation, sponsoring bills and watching them pass, and debating and arguing with people. The season reminds him of his childhood growing up in New York City, where a lot of wild things happened, he said.

"I like observing some of the more colorful members do their thing," Kavanagh said.

Despite a wide range of Republicans, from far-right to moderate, Kavanagh said the party is "extremely unified," even more so than in previous years. The lesser their majority margin, the more unified they are, he added.

"Whereas going back before this session, the prior two, we only had one-vote advantages in each

chamber, and nobody really broke ranks because they would have been the ones that did it and they would have incurred the full wrath of the base," he said.

Petersen added that he's looking forward to working with constituents on issues that make a difference in their lives, especially with small-business owners and on ways the government can cut red tape and regulatory issues.

Sundareshan said she's very proud of the Senate Democratic caucus and how they've been unified in the places where it mattered most.

"We have hung together in as many bills as we needed to, especially on the bills where our caucus unity was sending an important message to the Governor's Office that this bill that Republicans are pushing forward is divisive, it is attacking certain communities, and by the way, it's doing nothing to address the higher cost of living," she said.

Democrats are likely to maintain a unified front against Republican bills that push divisive culture war issues, making it harder to vote or do nothing to address the cost of living, she said, adding they will stand up together.

Give bipartisanship a chance

Even with two Republican leaders and one Democrat leader agreeing on the hot topics of the session, is there a decent chance for bipartisanship in a polarized and increasingly toxic political world?

Kavanagh said it's less likely, especially given the few moderate legislators. If they are, they don't campaign that way and they don't vote that way, he said, and many of the elections are already decided by primaries in solid blue or solid red districts.

"The primary voters are very active. The Democrats watch CNN and left wing blogs, and Republicans watch Fox News and right wing blogs," he said, "And it has created very extreme polarization. On partisan issues, we're like cats and dogs."

Despite Kavanagh's opinion that there's less chance for bipartisanship, Petersen is a little more optimistic, saying they're always open to bipartisanship. However, he put the responsibility on Democrats to introduce more bipartisan legislation.

"I think the problem is Democrats don't introduce very many bipartisan bills," Petersen said, adding if Democrats did, they'd see more of their bills moving through the process. "Most of the bills that get voted out, the Democrats also vote on those bills."

Sundareshan said she's always looking forward to bipartisan efforts, especially those that are truly bipartisan and treat her caucus as negotiating partners.

One good example of that is the Ag-to-Urban bill. Sundareshan said she was present for Senate Democrats during negotiations on that bill and ensured that caucus values and priorities were championed and heard.

"Ultimately, the end product was a true bipartisan solution that we were able to support," Sundareshan said.

GUEST COMMENTARIES

Rent stabilization is a bridge to affordability

In a recent guest commentary in the *Arizona Capitol Times*, lobbyist Courtney Gilstrap LeVinus of the Arizona Multihousing Association argued that rent control has failed everywhere and warned Arizona against allowing any form of rent stabilization.

That argument relies on oversimplification and selective examples to protect a status quo that is failing far too many Arizona families. Primarily, it fails to distinguish between rigid, outdated rent control policies and modern, temporary rent stabilization designed to address today's housing affordability crisis.

Not all rent policies are the same.

Classic rent control policies froze rents indefinitely, applied broadly, and ignored inflation, new construction, and market conditions. Many failed because they were rigid and permanent.

The legislation I am proposing is fundamentally different from outdated rent control models often cited by critics. It allows annual rent increases of 3% plus inflation, capped at 7%, includes exemptions such as for new construction, and sunsets after seven years. It is a temporary guardrail, not a rent freeze.



By Rep. Betty Villegas

The St. Paul, Minnesota, example cited by opponents actually proves why policy design matters. That ordinance failed initially because it lacked exemptions for new construction and sufficient flexibility. City leaders later corrected those shortcomings. My proposal avoids those mistakes by incorporating exemptions from the beginning, protecting renters while ensuring that housing development can continue.

There is broad agreement that Arizona must build more housing at all income levels. On that point, we agree. But

building housing takes time. Families facing rent increases of 20% or 30% cannot wait years for zoning reform, financing, and construction to catch up.

Temporary rent stabilization exists to bridge that gap. It buys time while the supply is built. It does not replace housing production, it complements it.

What the multihousing commentary fails to acknowledge is that Arizona law preempts cities like Tucson from adopting rent stabilization or basic rent safeguards, even during periods of extreme market disruption. Local governments hear daily from residents being priced out of their homes but lack the authority to act. When the Legislature blocks local action, the responsibility rests with the state.

Housing affordability is no longer a localized challenge, it is a statewide crisis affecting families in every legislative district. While Tucson may have brought this issue to the forefront, renters across Arizona, in rural communities, suburban neighborhoods, and fast-growing metro areas alike, are facing rising costs, limited options, and little protection against sudden increases. This legislation is not about one city. It is about responding to affordability pressures that now exist

statewide.

Displacement is already happening. In my district, longtime residents, seniors on fixed incomes, and working families are being forced out of their homes because rents are rising faster than wages. That displacement destabilizes neighborhoods, disrupts schools, and increases homelessness and public costs.

At the same time, Arizona's landlord-tenant laws are outdated and unbalanced. Written decades ago, they provide limited notice for rent increases and weak protections against retaliation, leaving renters afraid to report unsafe conditions or challenge unlawful practices.

Modernizing tenant protections alongside temporary rent stabilization is not radical. It is responsible governance.

Arizona does not face a choice between building housing and protecting renters. We must do both. Temporary rent stabilization is not permanent. It is a bridge, designed to preserve affordability and stability during a crisis while Arizona does what we all agree is necessary — build more housing for all income levels.

Rep. Betty Villegas, a Democrat, represents Legislative District 20 in Tucson.

Powering Arizona's economy takes foresight and investment

Everywhere you look, you can see Arizona's incredible growth happening in real time. But what we don't always stop to fully appreciate is that beyond growing in population, we've completely transformed our economy along the way.

Once looked down on as a "flyover state," Arizona has become the place to be for the biggest industries in our economy, from advanced manufacturing to high-tech startups.

We are now internationally recognized as the hub for semiconductors. All this growth isn't only powering our economy with great jobs; it's also supporting the onshoring of American manufacturing and bolstering our national security.

This success didn't just happen by accident. It was the result of intentional policy and strategic investments in infrastructure that allowed Arizona to strike when the iron was hot.

And following the Great Recession, when Arizona was hit harder than almost any other state due to our reliance on homebuilding, our leaders developed an aggressive plan to diversify our economy.



By Jimmy Lindblom

Today, Arizona faces new challenges — and once again, bold action is needed.

Utility providers like APS and SRP now project that Arizona's electricity demand will double in just six years. That's the same amount of growth it took more than a century to reach before.

It's not stopping anytime soon. Nearly 500 manufacturing companies are currently in the pipeline to move or expand in our state, according to the Arizona Commerce Authority. These projects represent jobs, investment, opportunity, and rising quality

of life for Arizonans — but only if we're ready.

Our energy infrastructure must rise to meet this demand. Fortunately, Arizona already has a strong foundation. We've built a balanced energy mix: 45% natural gas, 27% nuclear, 8% coal, and 19% renewables as of 2024. This diversity is one reason why our state has experienced no significant blackouts or brownouts, even as demand has climbed. It's proof that smart energy policy works. You can't say the same for some of our competitors, like Texas.

We're also leading the way on renewable energy. Arizona ranks among the top five states in solar-powered generating capacity, with more than 6,100 megawatts installed. In 2024, solar accounted for 82% of all newly approved energy generation capacity statewide — a clear sign we are embracing innovation while maintaining reliability.

But innovation without investment won't be enough. If we fail to act, our ability to support new businesses, power our communities, and keep utility costs affordable will be at risk.

That's why we formed Arizonans for Responsible Growth, a coalition of business and community leaders committed to keeping Arizona's economy strong by advocating for smart, forward-looking investments in our energy and water infrastructure. We believe that preparing for tomorrow means acting today.

Our goal is to identify, recruit, and support candidates who understand the relationship between responsible growth and healthy utilities. Our candidates will support diverse energy sources, data-driven demand projections, and provide the most affordable and reliable power to our residents and businesses.

Reliable power isn't a luxury — it's a necessity. It's about protecting the Arizona we've built and securing the opportunities we want to pass on to future generations.

Jimmy Lindblom is a native of Arizona. He is a founding member of Arizonans for Responsible Growth and currently serves as Chairman of the Maricopa County Planning and Zoning Commission, Co-Chairman of the Political Affairs Committee for the Arizona Chamber of Commerce, and Vice President of Economic Development & Infrastructure at Willmeng.

CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE

Pressure mounts at Capitol to extend Proposition 123

program converge, putting the education funding measure somewhere near center stage.

Democrats, public education groups and the governor are initially leaning toward a clean extension, but one senator leading the charge has said the plan is to resume negotiations on the topic of controversy lawmakers left off on last session — school choice.

“This is a live wire that I’m assuming is a priority, or should be a priority, to every legislator down there,” Marisol Garcia, president of the Arizona Education Association, said.

Prop. 123, approved by voters in 2016, followed the courts’ finding that the Legislature failed to fund education in step with inflation.

The measure increased the distribution rate from the Permanent Land Endowment Fund from 2.5% to 6.9% for ten years and granted districts discretion to spend the dollars where needed.

Efforts to extend Prop. 123 in some fashion began at the end of 2023, with the Republican majority taking the lead and unveiling a plan to use the funds solely to raise teacher salaries.

Public education groups, Democrats and the governor followed with their own proposal to increase the distribution rate and expand the scope of spending. Then, a stalemate put conversations off until the 2025 session.

Republicans, holding tight to their teacher pay plan, then started bringing Empowerment Scholarship Account advocates and charter schools into the fold.

And though no final language ever materialized in either chamber, the session ended with talk of Republicans incorporating constitutional school choice protections and charter deregulation into Prop. 123, both nonstarters for the governor, Democrats and public school groups.

Prop. 123 expired at the end of last fiscal year, leaving the Legislature to backfill around \$300 million from the general fund to make up the difference. And, now, as a new session dawns, focus has returned to the measure, though again with sparse consensus on provisions or new ways forward.

Gov. Katie Hobbs flagged it as a priority for her office this session.

“It’s a way to just give more dollars to our public schools that need it without costing taxpayers anything,” Hobbs said. “I think what I hear from Arizonans, and thankfully, it sounds like Republicans have gotten the message too, is that we need to do what we can to lower costs.”

Hobbs said she had not yet been directly involved in any conversations, but stressed the need to push the issue amid the current fiscal climate, pointing specifically to ESAs.

“Given our budget situation, I can’t imagine wanting to leave money on the table that’s going to help fund public schools, especially given that they haven’t been willing to make any reforms to the now billion-

KEY POINTS

- **Proposition 123 is on Legislature’s radar, but no clear details on reaching consensus**
- **Democrats seek clean renewal, Republicans still aim to tie in school choice**
- **Conversations come amid tight budget, capital funding lawsuit and ESA opposition**

dollar ESA entitlement program,” Hobbs said.

To start, Sen. J.D. Mesnard, R-Chandler, plans to start circling back.

“Once you take a few months off, people’s minds can change, or they have questions they didn’t have before, or they have new thoughts,” Mesnard said. “At this point, I’ve got to regroup with various members, various stakeholders out there and gauge their temperature.”

But Mesnard clarified this does not necessarily mean starting from square one.

He ended last session near a final draft and an initial filing, but ultimately saw the issue swallowed by the budget process.

“It’s that last 10% that people really drill into and get worked up over... (we’re) trying to achieve that, quote unquote, perfect version. It may not exist, but we continue to try to get there,” Mesnard said. “We’re not starting from scratch. I’d say we’re starting from a very good place.”

School choice protections will remain part of the conversation, encompassing both the ESA program and charter schools, according to Mesnard.

Jenny Clark, founder of school choice advocacy group Love Your School, said she would attend any Prop. 123 stakeholder meetings to which she was invited.

A spokesperson for the Goldwater Institute declined to comment on the matter, as did the president of the Arizona Charter Schools Association, Jake Logan.

In the House, Rep. Matt Gress, who initially led the charge in the chamber last session, said leadership is still gauging member interest in Prop. 123.

“Republicans have been very interested in raising teacher pay while protecting school choice, and I know that’s been a big disagreement with the Governor’s Office,” Gress said. “We’ll know more about where the House stands later this month.”

House Minority Whip Nancy Gutierrez, D-Tucson, said Democrats plan to fight for a clean continuation of Prop. 123 and to hit any school choice provisions with a hard no.

“That’s \$300 million a year that had to come from the general fund, that should be coming from this fund of state land sales,” Gutierrez said. “Why wouldn’t the Republicans want to free up \$300 million of spending? Again, they are not the party of fiscal responsibility.”

Garcia also made the case for a clean extension.

“The districts have been extremely thoughtful and transparent about how the money is used, and most importantly, it is used based on what each district needs,” Garcia said. “We know a program works. Why won’t we continue it?”

She noted maintaining the funding measure is crucial, given future strain on the state budget and the court-ordered obligation on the state, though on appeal, to fully fund capital budgets after a judge ruled current funding failed to meet the constitutional minimum.

And Garcia noted the ongoing opposition to the ESA program’s expansion, which is close to 100,000 students and is eclipsing \$1 billion.

“Before we start saying, well, everything has to be cut. The reality is, we know the biggest program that needs to be cut in education, and it’s the non-public education families that we’re paying for their kids to go to private schools,” Garcia said.

Garcia said the inclusion of school choice protections ultimately threw a wrench in the negotiating process. But, she said, the union is still looking to return to the table.

“We’re going to have to reestablish them and continue to build some bridges and places that we know are not normal,” Garcia said. “But I’m also hopeful that it is an election year, and in my experience in this work, every election year people love to say they support public education because it gets them elected.”

Mesnard is hoping to get more from stakeholders beyond the non-negotiables.

“I’d rather get feedback on — here’s what we care about and what would earn our support — as opposed to earn our opposition,” Mesnard said. “I’m going to listen more carefully. Ultimately, I welcome any feedback, as I always have.”

And, overall, Mesnard said he does not want to put a proposal out there until it’s sound.

“I’m trying to, frankly, be even a little more cautious, given that I don’t like the starts and stops of the past, and I fear if we do that anymore, people, even if they want Prop. 123, can be like, this isn’t going anywhere, and they’re not even think about it,” Mesnard said.

“If I got one more card to play on this, I’m going to play it at a very key moment. I don’t know when that will be, but I’m hoping for an opportunity.”

Gress also added the need for foresight beyond the Legislature, with any measure requiring final approval from the voters.

“We’re doing it because we want to pass the measure, not just to say we passed something in the Legislature,” Gress said.

LEGISLATURE

Hobbs' reelection campaign likely to dominate legislative session

BY REAGAN PRIEST
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Gov. Katie Hobbs and legislative leaders will face several pressing issues during the 2026 legislative session, including expiring K-12 education funding, groundwater conservation, and a state budget complicated by federal funding and tax cuts.

But hanging over all of those issues will be the governor's reelection campaign.

Republicans in the Legislature haven't been quiet about their plans to make Hobbs a one-term governor, even before any challengers emerged from the right. This year, they will do everything in their power to stymie the governor's policy priorities, block her nominations for leaders at state agencies and circumvent her veto pen by sending legislation directly to the voters.

For her part, Hobbs will have to negotiate with Republicans to pass a bipartisan budget, extend Proposition 123 to provide funding for schools, conform the state tax code to changes made in President Trump's "One Big Beautiful Bill," and get a Colorado River deal through the Legislature — all before hitting the campaign trail.

Political consultants on both sides of the aisle say the governor should focus on bipartisanship this session and pursue policy initiatives that appeal to moderate and independent voters.

"I think her base is fine," said Chuck Coughlin, the CEO of HighGround Public Affairs. "I don't think she needs to play the progressive card. What she needs to do is put some points on the board to demonstrate that she's getting results."

A Democratic consultant speaking to the *Arizona Capitol Times* on background agreed with Coughlin's assessment, saying Arizona Democrats understand that the governor has to appeal to the middle in order to stay in office.

And Hobbs is no stranger to the pragmatic, moderate approach to governing, but Republican consultants argue that her current legislative record consists mostly of vetoed conservative bills rather than negotiated bipartisan policies.

"What's the reasoning that we should give her four more years?" said Barrett Marson, a GOP public relations consultant. "Just telling voters 'I was a backstop to bad Republican ideas' probably isn't going to



Gov. Katie Hobbs giving a speech at her "Arizona First Rally" in Phoenix, on Sunday, Nov. 2, 2025. (Ellis Preston / Arizona Capitol Times)

KEY POINTS

- **Gov. Katie Hobbs' reelection campaign is likely to hang over the legislative session**
- **Republicans are expected to obstruct the governor at every turn**
- **Consultants say Hobbs should play to the middle, compromise and stay disciplined**

do it."

But Democrats see it differently, arguing that voters are glad to have Hobbs as the last line of defense against more extreme Republican legislation and that the Governor's Office has advanced policy goals over the past three legislative sessions. Democrats usually point to the governor's signature on the 1864 abortion ban repeal, the bipartisan compromise on an Ag-to-Urban groundwater bill and her ability to pass three negotiated state budgets alongside Republican leaders.

Most consultants agree that Hobbs' largest task this session will be balancing the state budget in the wake of significant federal funding and tax cuts, as well as low state revenue collections. The Joint Legislative Budget Committee estimated in December that it will cost the state over \$400 million in general fund money in the current fiscal year to conform to federal changes passed by Congress and signed by Trump.

Coughlin said Hobbs should tap into the

state's \$1.6 billion budget stabilization fund, colloquially known as the rainy day fund, which lawmakers have specifically set aside for shortfalls caused by recessions or natural disasters.

"If I'm her, I make a play for that money," Coughlin said. "And let (Republicans) say no. What good is a rainy day fund if it's raining and nobody's spending the money?"

Consultants also say Hobbs' proposal to only adopt tax cuts aimed at middle-class earners in H.R.1 while leaving out those aimed at high earners and corporations will also play well with many voters. Democrats across the state and country are leaning into an affordability message as voters continue to rank the economy as one of their top priorities.

"Where she's trying to go for this tax cut I think is a huge winner for folks," one Democratic consultant said. "The fact that Republicans haven't totally gotten aligned on their messaging on that front makes her

look better."

While Republicans expect Hobbs to pursue reforms to Arizona's school voucher program, Empowerment Scholarship Accounts, one Democrat said she should avoid wading too deeply into the issue because it could alienate some voters. Democrats are also suggesting that Hobbs avoid taking the bait on "culture war" bills related to transgender student athletes or immigration.

But Republicans say the governor can't avoid addressing immigration, arguing the two task forces she created to address drug trafficking and transnational criminal organizations are not enough to persuade Arizonans who consistently rank the border as a top issue. One Republican consultant said Hobbs "is not dealing with that issue in a sufficient way."

And consultants on both sides of the aisle agreed Hobbs' staff needs to remain disciplined and focused to avoid the same unforced errors that plagued her administration early on, like her decision to pull her agency director nominations from Senate consideration in 2023, an alleged pay-to-play scandal involving a campaign donor and the Department of Child Safety, and a controversy over a \$700,000 new state logo.

"How do you not self-sabotage? Well, you get better staff," one Republican consultant said.

One Democratic consultant suggested keeping announcements and policy moves hidden from view — and from Democratic legislators — until the last possible moment. In contrast, Coughlin suggested taking a page from President Trump's playbook and flooding the zone.

"In previous administrations, we always had the slogan, 'We gotta put more toys in the crib,'" Coughlin said. "We have to throw more things down into the Legislature and into the media room so you guys are talking about other things."

Most politicians agree Hobbs is entering 2026 strong, with a massive campaign war chest, an incumbency advantage and midterm election headwinds on her side. But the legislative session and the months following it could make or break her candidacy.

"This is not a blowout election," Coughlin said. "This is not anybody's foregone conclusion. It's going to come down to the candidate and the campaign."

AGENCIES

Hobbs heads into 4th legislative session with 8 agency directors unconfirmed

BY REAGAN PRIEST
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Gov. Katie Hobbs will enter her fourth and final legislative session of her first term in office without Senate-confirmed directors at eight state agencies, setting up another round of confirmation battles that have become a fixture in an era of divided state government.



Gov. Katie Hobbs. (AP Photo/Rebecca Noble)

Eight nominees are expected to face the Senate Director Nominations Committee during the 2026 legislative session, seven of

whom are the governor's second choice for their respective positions. The nomination process has dragged into 2026 due to strategic maneuvering by Republicans, Hobbs' decision to pull her nominations in 2023 and an ensuing court battle that ended in 2024 with a promise to restart hearings in 2025.

Sen. Jake Hoffman, R-Queen Creek, has served as chairman of the committee and arbiter of Hobbs' nominations since the committee was created specifically for the governor after her election in 2022. He is known for raking nominees over the coals, questioning them over anything from years-old social media posts criticizing President Donald Trump to memberships of professional organizations that promote diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives.

The committee, known as DINO, also features Republican heavyweight Sens. T.J. Shope and John Kavanagh. The two occasionally vote with Democratic Sens. Analise Ortiz and Flavio Bravo to advance Hobbs' nominees, even if Hoffman disapproves.

Hoffman did not respond to an interview request for this story, and he has traditionally preferred to keep his plans for DINO close to his chest. He has also long argued that Hobbs has picked unqualified political allies as nominees to lead her state agencies, while Hobbs insists Hoffman is an obstructionist using his position to kneecap her initiatives.

Hobbs has also said Hoffman's hostility has made it difficult for her office to find replacements for directors who are forced out or rejected. But one political consultant, speaking on the condition of anonymity,

KEY POINTS

- **Gov. Katie Hobbs will send eight director nominations to the Senate in 2026**
- **Her nominations have been held up by the Senate Director Nominations Committee since 2023**
- **Sen. Jake Hoffman and Senate Republicans have forced Hobbs to choose new appointees**

noted that Hobbs' staff has not always shown unwavering support for nominees facing contentious confirmation hearings.

"When (Dr. Theresa Cullen) got eviscerated at DINO, she walked to her car alone," the consultant said. "... This woman just got f***ing torched, wrongly or rightly, she got torched and there was no one there to go, 'Hey, you did fine, these people are just a**holes,' whatever you say to someone who just got torched."

Other consultants say Hoffman's antics, which are often characterized as a move to stunt the governor's chances of reelection, won't break through to the average voter in November. Others believe it could be an asset for Hobbs, if she plays her cards right.

"She should be making a case about that with a wider (audience)," said Chuck Coughlin, the CEO of consulting firm HighGround. "I would expect her to talk about it in the State of the State. That would be a good thing to talk about in State of the State, 'I'm going into my last year in office, and I still don't have any confirmation of a director for this department.'"

The uphill battles

Of the eight nominees awaiting confirmation, only one has already received a hearing and a recommendation to the full Senate: Karen Peters at the Department of Environmental Quality.

That doesn't mean Peters can expect to be confirmed, however. Her nomination, which is set to expire in February, did not make it to a vote before the 2025 session ended in late June, with Hoffman telling the *Arizona Capitol Times* in July that it was unclear whether Peters had the votes to be confirmed.

Hoffman was the lone no vote on Peters'

nomination during her confirmation hearing and credited "industry lobbyists" for swaying other members of the Republican caucus in her favor.

Virginia "Ginny" Rountree is Hobbs' second pick to lead the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System, after Carmen Heredia resigned when Hoffman accused her of mishandling the aftermath of the sober living homes scandal. Over \$2 billion in state Medicaid funds were distributed to fraudulent providers, and Hobbs' administration has been accused of overcorrecting and cracking down on legitimate providers.

Rountree was nominated to her position in September 2025 and has already appeared before lawmakers in committee to discuss the sober living homes scandal. While not at AHCCCS during the fraud, Rountree previously worked at the agency between 2014 and 2019 and also held a leadership position at the Department of Economic Security.

Another nominee likely to face scrutiny is Ruby Dhillon-Williams at the Department of Housing. Her predecessor and former boss, Joan Serviss, was rejected by both DINO and the full Senate after Republicans accused her of plagiarism in her former roles.

ADOH is also under scrutiny after its most recent sunset audit, which found the department inadvertently wired \$2 million to fraudsters claiming to be affordable housing developers. ADOH's statutory life was only extended by one year, giving the Legislature more oversight of its operations.

The newbies

Debbie Johnston at the Department of Health Services is Hobbs' newest director nominee, having been tapped for the job in November 2025. Johnston is the former executive vice president of the Arizona Hospital and Healthcare Association and is Hobbs' third pick to lead ADHS.

Hobbs' previous ADHS nominees, Dr. Theresa Cullen and Jennie Cunico, were rejected by Hoffman and Senate Republicans for their views on and actions during the Covid pandemic. Will Humble, director of ADHS under former Governor Jan Brewer and Doug Ducey, said he doesn't foresee Johnston facing the same scrutiny.

"I think she's actually quite confirmable, with her personality, her track record, where she is in her career, her lack of social media presence," Humble said. "And she's not a hot head. She does her homework."

John Conley, Hobbs' nominee for the adjutant general and director of the Department of Emergency and Military Affairs, is also expected to do well before the DINO committee. He was appointed in June to replace former Adjutant General Kerry Muehlenbeck, who left the job to return to teaching at Mesa Community College.

Conley, who previously served as director of administrative services at DEMA before being promoted, has been welcomed to his role by Arizona Republicans like U.S. Reps. Juan Ciscomani and Abe Hamadeh. Hobbs told reporters after his appointment that she believes Conley is a bipartisan pick.

Hobbs' nominee for the Office of Economic Opportunity, Mary Foote, was also recently selected for her role to replace an outgoing director. Carlos Contreras, the governor's first choice, saw his nomination expire in August 2025 after it was rejected by DINO.

Foote joined OEO in February 2024, serving as the director of the Greater Arizona Development Authority before moving into the director position.

The question marks

The Office of Tourism has been led by Alix Skelpsa Ridgway since Hobbs' original nominee, Lisa Urias, resigned from the position in late 2024 following accusations of a conflict of interest in a contract for a new state logo. Skelpsa Ridgway's nomination was not transmitted to the Senate until June 2025, near the end of the legislative session, and she has not yet faced the DINO committee.

Republicans lambasted Hobbs and Urias over the new state logo, which cost \$700,000 and was designed by the brother of the CEO of a communications firm founded by Urias. The logo is likely to come up in Skelpsa Ridgway's confirmation hearing, as she was serving as deputy director of the Tourism Office at the time.

Maria Ailor is serving as the interim director of the Department of Insurance and Financial Institutions after DINO and the full Senate rejected Barbara Richardson during the 2025 session. Ailor moved into the director position after serving as assistant director of DIFI's market regulation and consumer services division.

It is unclear whether Ailor will be Hobbs' official nominee for the role, as many interim directors appointed in 2025 returned to their previous agency roles after the governor tapped a permanent nominee.

ELECTIONS

Lawmakers face re-election amid shifting political landscape

BY JAKOB THORINGTON

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State lawmakers are running for re-election this year, and after a red wave in 2024 that expanded Republicans' majorities in both legislative chambers, Democrats are confident they can gain ground in November.

"This year truly is the best chance that Democrats have at taking the majority," House Minority Leader and Arizona Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee Co-Chair Oscar De Los Santos told reporters and constituents in a Zoom call on Jan. 5. "The conditions are there. The country is fed up with Donald Trump's obsession with petty politics and nonsense and distractions."

The Governor's Office and several other federal and state executive offices will be up for grabs in November, as well as the entire state Legislature. Republicans currently hold a 17-13 majority in the Senate and a 33-27 majority in the House.

De Los Santos said the state Democratic legislative campaign committee is targeting seven legislative districts.

Legislative District 2

The north Phoenix district is represented by two Republicans and one Democrat. Sen. Shawna Bolick, R-Phoenix; and Reps. Justin Wilmeth, R-Phoenix; and Stephanie Simacek, D-Phoenix, have all filed statements of interest with the Secretary of State's Office to run for re-election.

Bolick defeated former Democratic state Rep. Judy Schwiebert in the 2024 election by more than 3% of votes when Schwiebert tried to move seats from the House to the Senate. Simacek got the most votes in the district's House race and Wilmeth just finished ahead of fellow Republican Ari Bradshaw by .10% of votes.

Bradshaw has also filed a statement of interest to run again for the House in LD2, but Simacek is the only Democrat to have filed so far. Other candidates include Republicans Linda Brickman, Neil DeSanti, Danielle Skranak and Arizona Independent Party candidate Tom Simes.

Two Democrats, Krista Andrews and Daniel Toporek, have filed statements of interest to run for the Senate in the district, and two other Republicans, Timothy Ferrara and Christian Hinz, have filed paperwork to run against Bolick.

Republicans make up about 35% of registered voters in the district, according to the most recent report from the Secretary of State's Office published in October. Another 26% of voters are registered Democrats and the rest are registered as independents or affiliated with other parties.

The Arizona Independent Redistricting Commission has labeled LD2 as a highly competitive district, giving Republicans a 3.80% advantage.

Legislative District 4

This Scottsdale and northeast Phoenix district flipped

KEY POINTS

- **Democrats see 2026 as their best chance to gain majority in state Legislature**
- **Republicans hold 17-13 Senate majority and 33-27 House majority**
- **Democrats are targeting seven legislative districts in their re-election efforts.**

entirely to Republican control after the 2024 election when it was previously represented by two Democrats at the Legislature in the prior election cycle.

Reps. Matt Gress, R-Phoenix; and Pamela Carter, R-Scottsdale, defeated Democrats Kelli Butler and Karen Gresham. Carter had the closest race and beat Butler by 1% of votes, while Sen. Carine Werner, R-Scottsdale, defeated former state Sen. Christine Marsh by almost 4% of votes.

Aaron Lieberman, a former Democratic state representative who unsuccessfully ran for governor in 2022, has filed a statement of interest to challenge Werner for the LD4 Senate seat.

The district's House race has six candidates who are interested in running, including Gress, Carter and Gresham. Republicans Sandra Christensen and Jeffrey Nelson have also filed statements of interest along with Democrat Tank Hanna.

Republican voters make up about 39% of registered voters in the district, and Democrats account for 26%, but a sizable independent voter base could determine how the district is represented after 2026.

The Arizona Independent Redistricting Commission also considers LD4 as highly competitive, with Republicans holding a 3.42% advantage.

Legislative District 9

The west Mesa district of LD9 was the only competitive district in 2024 where Democrats took all three legislative seats.

Reps. Lorena Austin, D-Mesa; and Seth Blattman, D-Mesa, both narrowly defeated their Republican opponents, Kylie Barber and Mary Ann Mendoza, in 2024, with Austin emerging as the top candidate with 26% of the vote.

Blattman announced in December that he won't seek re-election to instead pursue a new professional opportunity with greater "long-term stability" than his House seat and endorsed Democrat Jacob Martinez to replace him.

"Serving the people of LD 9 has been the honor of my life," Blattman said in a statement. "Together we launched Arizona's first Micro-Business Loan Program, putting

many mom-and-pop shops on a more solid footing, and supported our public schools. I'm proud of what we accomplished and confident that Arizona's best days are ahead."

Austin has also filed a statement of interest to run again for her seat, and Republican Bradley Bettencourt is the only Republican seeking a House seat in LD9 so far.

Former Democratic state Sen. Eva Burch beat Republican Robert Scantlebury by more than 3% in 2024, but Burch resigned during the 2025 legislative session. Her appointed replacement, Sen. Kiana Sears, has filed a statement of interest to run against Republican Bridget Fitzgibbons for the Senate.

While LD9 was Democrats' greatest performing competitive district in 2024, Republicans still hold a voter registration advantage of nearly 32% compared to Democrats' near 29%.

LD9 has one of the tightest advantages among highly competitive districts. The redistricting commission gives Democrats a 2.6% advantage over Republicans despite Republicans leading in voter registration.

Legislative District 13

The Chandler district of LD13 was another that lost all Democratic representation in the Legislature in 2024, with all three seats going to Republicans.

Reps. Jeff Weninger, R-Chandler; and Julie Willoughby, R-Chandler, both defeated their Democratic opponents, Brandy Reese and Nicholas Gonzales, in 2024, as both Republicans received nearly 26% of the vote each to lead all candidates in that race.

Willoughby is now seeking to flip chambers as Sen. J.D. Mesnard, R-Chandler, will be termed out of his seat after this year. Weninger is running for Chandler Mayor, and current Republican Chandler Mayor Kevin Hartke is running for the state House in LD13. The only other candidate running for Senate in the district is Democrat Kristie O'Brien.

Weninger's wife, Janet Weninger, announced in September she's running for the state House as a Republican in the district.

"As a mom, foster care advocate, and entrepreneur, I have spent my life helping others succeed. Arizona is well-positioned for success, but there is more work to be done. From repairing the Department of Child Safety, to fighting for law enforcement, to ensuring parents can make decisions in the best interest of their kids, our best days lie ahead," Janet Weninger said in a statement when she launched her campaign.

Reese and Democrat Racquel Armstrong will be running for the House and Republicans Debra Schinke and Joe Granado have also filed statements of interest for House seats.

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Hobbs and lawmakers push for early special session on tax conformity

BY JAKOB THORINGTON
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A special session could be on the horizon immediately after the state Legislature's opening day as lawmakers are considering conforming to the federal government's tax code.

Republican legislators and Gov. Katie Hobbs have said they'd be willing to call a special session at the beginning of the regular legislative session to address the tax issue as Arizona faces uncertain budget implications over the next few years.

"The Arizona House stands ready to act and we are prepared to end the confusion on day one," House Republicans said in a November joint statement. "To give taxpayers certainty heading into the upcoming filing season, we urge the Governor to call a special session on tax conformity on the first day of the legislative session beginning January 12th."

Hobbs, a Democrat, signaled she also wants the state to conform to the federal tax code quickly with a Nov. 20 executive order that updates tax forms for the upcoming year to include the higher standard deduction passed into law by the federal House Resolution 1 — "The One Big Beautiful Bill."

In a Nov. 20 statement, Hobbs said: "Arizona must provide relief for families who are seeing the cost of living increasing and struggling just to get by. While I've taken this important step to cut taxes for the middle class, there's still more work to be done. I encourage the Legislature to join with me to immediately codify my Middle Class Tax Cuts Package to increase the standard deduction, support our seniors and allow everyday Arizonans to benefit from tax deductions on tips, overtime and car loan interest when paying their state taxes."

KEY POINTS

- **Arizona lawmakers consider special session for federal tax code conformity**
- **Governor Katie Hobbs and House Republicans support the special session**
- **Arizona's budget stabilization fund may be tapped to cover the shortfall**

Staff on the Joint Legislative Budget Committee estimated in December that conforming to the reconciliation bill could reduce the state's general fund revenue by \$1.15 billion over three years through fiscal year 2028.

During a Finance Advisory Committee meeting on Oct. 9, JLBC Director Richard Stavneak said the state's cash balance is expected to be positive through the next three years, with a lowest ending balance projection of \$67 million available in the general fund through 2028, which would be insufficient to continue many one-time projects that are being funded in this year's budget and grossly insufficient to cover conforming to H.R. 1.

Currently, the state is spending \$580 million in one-time projects, and some spending items are anticipated to continue for more than one year. The state is paying \$195 million to subsidize health insurance for state employees. That line item is considered one-time, but budget analysts also call it "ongoing one-time" because it's funded every year.

"Relative to our \$67 million balance, we've already outlined what I believe to be a lot of stress points about what's going to be competing for that \$67 million, like the \$1.7 (billion) stress points in the form of H.R. 1, of

tax and spending issues, as well as ongoing one-time spending," Stavneak said.

Arizona has \$1.6 billion in its Budget Stabilization Fund, also known as its "rainy day fund." The House Minority Appropriations Committee Chairwoman, Rep. Stephanie Stahl Hamilton, D-Tucson, told the *Arizona Capitol Times* that lawmakers have discussed tapping into the rainy day fund, even if it's not enough to cover the \$1.7 billion the state may need.

"I'm a little more troubled than I normally am," Stahl Hamilton said. "We're going to have to work hard this session," she said. "This budget's going to be a lot more challenging and problematic than what we've seen in years past."

Senate Majority Leader John Kavanagh, R-Fountain Hills, said he thinks the budget will be easy to pass since there won't be much room to spend.

"The revenue forecast foresees a lean but speedy budget," said Kavanagh.

Despite wanting Arizona to conform early, Hobbs has made it clear she will negotiate further tax conformity provisions in the budget that affect high earners and corporations, which is standard practice for lawmakers every year.

The Senate Finance Committee Chairman Sen. J.D. Mesnard, R-Chandler, said in a November statement that Hobbs shouldn't receive credit for something that was enacted by Republicans in the federal government with her executive order since it conforms to middle-class tax cuts under H.R. 1.

"Let's be clear. Gov. Hobbs didn't create these tax cuts — she's trying to take a victory lap on the GOP's work," Mesnard said. "The Legislature remains committed to formalizing the tax relief enacted by President Trump and Congress. I am looking forward to putting together a more comprehensive proposal that aligns and builds upon those reforms in ways that fully benefit Arizona's hard-working families and small businesses in the upcoming session."

The Arizona State Capitol Museum building in Phoenix, Arizona. (Gage Skidmore / Flickr)



JUSTICE

Prison reform remains paramount for GOP in 2026

BY KIERA RILEY

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Prison oversight and criminal justice reform bills maintain some residual momentum from the prior legislative session, leaving lawmakers and lobbyists hopeful in passing and funding key policy priorities.

As lawmakers, advocates and attorneys keep eyes on a string of complaints and reports on poor conditions, staffing and safety in the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry, funding the prison oversight office has emerged as the top priority this session.

In the meantime, legislators continue to keep close tabs on ADCRR, and stakeholders plan to revive and workshop criminal reform legislation across the board.

Sen. Shawna Bolick, R-Phoenix, and Rep. Walt Blackman, R-Snowflake, joined by Justice Action Network, remain on the crusade to see the Independent Correctional Oversight Office fully funded after legislation passed last session without any funding.

The office, headed by a director appointed by the governor and confirmed by the Senate, would be responsible for monitoring confinement conditions, providing information about inmates rights, accepting complaints and gathering data for an annual report.

The framework for creating the office is already enacted in law, but the request for \$1.5 million to actually get work off the ground fell flat, leaving renewed enthusiasm to push the issue this session.

Bolick and Blackman introduced mirror appropriation bills, House Bill 2063 and Senate Bill 1032, to earmark the \$1.5 million to make the oversight mechanism functional.

Bolick said she wished the office would have been funded last session as originally hoped and noted the continued need amid more deaths inside prison walls, as well as the looming potential for a federal judge to put the department under receivership.

“Obviously, if we had some sort of independent entity, we could not only hold them accountable, but hopefully turn things around more quickly,” Bolick said.

Blackman noted the oversight committee could work to preempt any takeover.

“(Hobbs) is going to have to decide if she wants receivership or if she wants to be able to get in front of this,” Blackman said. “This board will give her an opportunity to get in front of this.”

And as for coalition support, Blackman guessed members of the majority would be on board, if just purely from an economic standpoint.

“When we're looking at over \$10 million of fines or fees or lawsuits, 1.5 is a drop in the bucket. So when we're looking from a perspective of saving taxpayer dollars, I would say that my colleagues are on board

KEY POINTS

- **Lawmakers push funding for independent prison oversight office**
- **Scrutiny continues over prison conditions, safety, custody classification**
- **Legislation on home confinement returning for another session**

with this,” Blackman said.

Hobbs put off any money talk to budget negotiations and portended future conversations on the scope of the oversight office.

“The fact is that there was a lot of compromise when it came to that bill and the creation of that office, and so I'm certainly willing to continue those conversations to make sure that that office is as effective as possible,” Hobbs said.

She backed up Director Ryan Thornell's time at the helm, too.

“Our prison system has been neglected for a long time, and so it's going to take a long time to right the ship,” Hobbs said. I think he's on the right track, and I think that we should all be working together toward that end. And so as much as oversight can be helpful, we welcome it.”

Oversight is not likely to be exclusive to the new statutory office.

Over the summer, Sen. Kevin Payne, R-Peoria, and Rep. Quang Nguyen, R-Prescott Valley, held a committee hearing with the department to press on staffing and safety in state prisons after a string of homicides, an effort Payne plans to continue in this session.

He noted his ongoing concern over custody classification, which determines the level of supervision and restriction on an inmate, after Ricky Wassenaar, a man incarcerated at Arizona State Prison Complex in Tucson, allegedly killed three inmates after he was reduced to a less restrictive custody level.

“You get those violent people that really have nothing to lose, and they don't have any problem attacking other people,” Payne said.

He said the current custody classification system puts other inmates, who may have lower level offenses, in jeopardy.

“We didn't put them away to be killed, and they're coming out dead,” Payne said.

In a statement, an ADCRR spokesperson said,

“Following the ad hoc committee a few months ago, the Department has maintained open communication with Senator Payne and Representative Nguyen, including direct communications with their offices and an on-going fulfillment of their public records requests.”

Nguyen did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Beyond oversight, Payne is also working with stakeholders on reviving a home confinement bill.

Last session, Senate Bill 1366 aimed to allow a select population of inmates early supervised release.

The legislation would allow those convicted of a list of non-violent offense, who had served at least one year of their sentence, were within 18 months of getting out and had no violent disciplinary infractions, to be released early, with electronic monitoring for at least one year, or until the inmate becomes eligible for probation or community supervision.

“There's a lot of prerequisites to them getting out,” Payne said. “But one of the things that I think it will help, is that it gives them incentive to behave.”

Advocates have tried to push the bill through over the past three sessions, but hit a different wall each time.

This time around, however, Payne and stakeholders are hopeful, with recent tweaks to the language and mechanics of monitoring breathing new life into the proposal.

Steven Scharboneau, an attorney with Steven George Law and advocate for the bill, said this session started with a more robust stakeholder process, putting it on steadier ground to start.

“There's a population of people that are in prison right now that don't necessarily need that level of supervision, that could be out in the community,” Scharboneau said. “They could be participating. They could be with their families, raising their kids. They could be out there paying taxes. They could be out there working, they could be out there contributing to the economy instead of, instead of sucking away from it.”

Beyond home confinement, lobbyists floated the potential for bills around probation, court-ordered fee reform and earned release credits.

John Fabricius, executive director of Praxis Initiative, plans to work to support the above bills and then some, and in general, he senses a greater attitude around criminal justice reform at the Legislature.

“What we found down there is that there are people that are experiencing this through their own loved ones, whether it's lawmakers that have loved ones that have been inside, or they have constituents,” Fabricius said. “This is touching people. It's getting to people. It's getting to lawmakers.”

LEGISLATURE

Arizona House Republicans appoint Grant Hanna as new chief of staff

BY JAKOB THORINGTON
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For the first time in nearly a decade, the Arizona House of Representatives will enter the legislative session with a new chief of staff for the majority party.

House Republicans will enter the session with Grant Hanna as their new chief of staff after recently serving as deputy chief of staff in the Senate. Hanna, hired in July, replaced Michael Hunter, who resigned from the position last session after more than 8 years in the role.

Doug Cole, the chief operating officer at HighGround Public Affairs Consultants and a former top staffer at the Arizona House of Representatives, said Hunter's tenure as chief of staff was unique because he was the top staffer for five different speakers dating back to 2016.

"It doesn't matter what party you're a member of or hold allegiance to, just the mere fact he had been there for so long with so many speakers, that does create a vacuum," Cole said.

Hunter resigned from House majority staff to accept a position as the chief

KEY POINTS

- **Arizona House of Representatives hires Grant Hanna as new chief of staff**
- **Hanna replaces long-time chief Michael Hunter who resigned early last year**
- **House Speaker Steve Montenegro aims to strengthen policy team with new hires**

operating officer of the adoptive and foster care nonprofit Christian Family Care's in February 2025, shortly after the legislative session started.

House Speaker Steve Montenegro told the *Arizona Capitol Times* in July that hiring Hanna was an opportunity for Republicans to strengthen their policy team with talent.

House Republicans faced criticism from other state leaders during the 2025 session for holding up budget discussions,

including Senate President Warren Petersen, who said at the end of last session that the House held up sine die by two months amid negotiations.

"There are areas that we need to strengthen," Montenegro said. "There are areas that we want to continue to be better at and not just better, but complementary. There are areas that can and should be complemented with talent."

Hanna, who brings more than a decade of experience from the Senate, has built a strong reputation among legislators and lobbyists. He started in the Senate as a research analyst and eventually worked his way to deputy chief of staff for four years before becoming the chief of staff at the House of Representatives.

"He's been the number two for a long time. He's worked his way up from the basement up to the second floor offices." Cole said of Hanna. "The institution as a whole, in my opinion, will be well served by Grant's knowledge and leadership skills."

Montenegro said Hanna's experience and his respect for the institution were some of the things he valued most about his new chief of staff.

"His style is something I appreciate. It matches my own where we want to hear what others have to say. We want people to feel respected and we want to uphold the values of that institution so that Arizona has the best government available and possible," Montenegro said.

Matt Specht briefly filled in as the House majority chief of staff following Hunter's resignation. With Hanna stepping in as chief of staff, Specht was promoted to chief operating officer and leads the day-to-day functions of the House.

The speaker also had to replace former Deputy Chief of Staff and General Counsel Linley Wilson, who in October joined the law firm Holtzman Vogel as a partner. Replacing Wilson is Kelsey Jahntz, who has been promoted from director of policy to deputy chief of staff.

The House also hired Robyn Poole as general counsel and former Holtzman Vogel Associate Daniel Tilleman as deputy general counsel. Poole has spent more than a decade working as an attorney in the private sector and various levels of government, including the Attorney General's Office, the Arizona Corporation Commission and the city of Phoenix.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10

Lawmakers face re-election amid shifting political landscape

Despite Republicans accounting for almost 36% of registered voters in the district, LD13 has an even tighter redistricting commission vote spread than LD9, with Republicans holding a 1.56% advantage in the highly competitive district. Democrats make up about 27% of registered voters in the district.

Legislative District 16

Republicans also took all three seats in LD16, which includes Casa Grande.

Former Democratic state Rep. Keith Seaman lost his 2024 bid for reelection by about 2.5% of votes to Rep. Chris Lopez, R-Casa Grande. Rep. Teresa Martinez, R-Casa Grande, took home the most votes in the House race and Seaman's daughter, Stacey Seaman, lost to Sen. T.J. Shope, R-Coolidge, by 12% of votes.

Shope is running for re-election and Democrat Elaine Aldrete is the only other candidate in the Senate race.

De Los Santos said some districts would only see one Democratic candidate running as a "single-shot" candidate for the House in an attempt to focus the voter pool on one candidate for at least one House seat. Only Democrat Dean Dill has filed paperwork to run for the House, while

Martinez and Lopez are the only Republicans who are running so far.

About one-third of registered voters in the district are Republicans and 27% are Democrats. LD16 is another one of the redistricting commission's highly competitive districts and Republicans have a 3.62% advantage.

Legislative District 17 and Legislative District 23

Neither of these districts is considered competitive by the redistricting commission, but both saw upset victories over the parties that held advantages in each.

In LD17, which includes Oro Valley, Marana and Tucson, Rep. Kevin Volk, D-Tucson, beat former Republican Rep. and Freedom Caucus member Cory McGarr by more than 2% of votes in the district as a single-shot candidate despite Republicans holding more than 8% advantage in the district, according to the redistricting commission.

Volk is running for re-election along with his seatmate, Rep. Rachel Jones, R-Tucson. Democrat Matthew Coelho has also filed a statement of interest for a House race, but Democrats narrowly lost to McGarr and Keshel in 2022

when they ran two House candidates instead of single-shotting.

Republicans Kirk Fiehler, Avery Block and John Winchester have also filed statements of interest for the House.

Sen. Vince Leach, R-Tucson, is not seeking re-election in LD17. He beat the late Democrat John McLean by 2% of votes shortly before McLean's death.

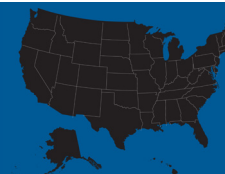
Republicans Christopher King and Anthony Dunham have filed paperwork to run for the Senate in LD17, along with Democrat Hunter Holt.

In LD23, Rep. Michele Pena, R-Yuma, has won both her 2024 and 2022 elections despite Democrats having nearly a 17% advantage, according to the redistricting commission. Pena was the top vote-getter in the district's House race with more than 34% of votes while Rep. Mariana Sandoval, D-Yuma, took the other House seat.

Pena is joined by two other Republicans, Gary Garcia Snyder and James Holmes, in filing paperwork to run for the House. Sandoval is running for re-election and Democrats Emilia Cortez and Juan Manuel Guerrero are also running for the House.

FROM OTHER STATES

NEWS OF INTEREST FROM ACROSS THE NATION



Alabama

TUBERVILLE FILES PAPERWORK TO ENTER GOVERNOR'S RACE

HOOVER — Republican U.S. Sen. Tommy Tuberville has filed paperwork to run for governor. Tuberville announced last year that he would not seek reelection for the Senate seat he won in 2020. He signed paperwork at the Alabama Republican Party headquarters to officially enter the governor's race. The Republican said business recruitment, education, infrastructure and addressing fraud prevention would be priorities if elected. Former U.S. Sen. Doug Jones is also running, potentially setting up a rematch between the two candidates who faced off in the 2020 Senate race.

California

REP. DOUG LAMALFA'S DEATH LEAVES A VACANT HOUSE SEAT

SACRAMENTO — Republican Rep. Doug LaMalfa's sudden death leaves a new vacant seat in the House. It comes just ahead of the 2026 midterm elections. LaMalfa's death will further intensify a fight between Republicans and Democrats this year for control of the U.S. House. His passing shrinks Republicans' narrow majority in the House to 218 seats, leaving Democrats at 213. California Gov. Gavin Newsom has 14 days to call a special election to fill LaMalfa's remaining term.

Colorado

AUDIT OF FIRED SAFESPORT INVESTIGATOR LEADS TO REOPENING OF 3 SEX CASES

DENVER — An external audit of cases handled by a former U.S. Center for SafeSport investigator accused of sex crimes he allegedly committed at his previous job as a vice officer led to the reopening of three of the 114 cases he handled while working at the watchdog agency. The audit also found that while Jason Krasley largely acted professionally with people he interviewed, some said he "utilized an informal interview style that felt 'overly familiar.'"

Florida

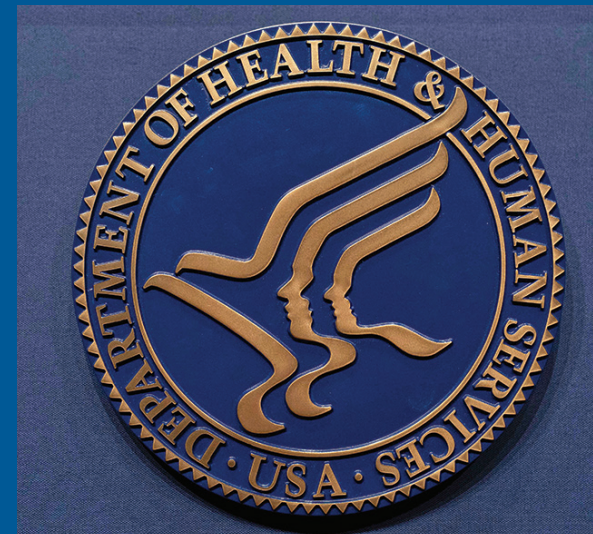
HOW DELCY RODRÍGUEZ COURTED TRUMP AND ROSE TO POWER IN VENEZUELA

MIAMI — Delcy Rodríguez, Venezuela's interim president, has risen to prominence through strategic moves and political savvy. In 2017, as Venezuela's foreign minister, she directed Citgo to donate \$500,000 to Donald Trump's inauguration, aiming to attract American investment.

Illinois

TRUMP ADMINISTRATION SAYS IT'S WITHHOLDING SOCIAL SAFETY MONEY OVER FRAUD CONCERNS

President Donald Trump's administration is withholding funding to help needy families with children in five states governed by Democrats. Officials cited fraud concerns as a reason for the action targeting California, Colorado, Illinois, Minnesota and New York. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services will require extra documentation to access the funds. Officials in the states say the administration is motivated by politics. The administration has not given details of the fraud claims. The programs are lifelines to some low-income families, helping with day care, cash assistance and job training. Gov. Kathy Hochul says New York is prepared to go to court to preserve the funding.



The Health and Human Services seal is seen before the news conference of Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. at the Hubert Humphrey Building Auditorium in Washington, Wednesday, April 16, 2025. (AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana, File)

Georgia

MARCH 10 ELECTION SET TO REPLACE MARJORIE TAYLOR GREENE IN CONGRESS

ATLANTA — Voters in northwest Georgia will head to the polls on March 10 to choose a successor to U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene. Gov. Brian Kemp set the date, following Greene's resignation after five tumultuous years in Congress. The race for Georgia's 14th Congressional District is already crowded. As many as 19 Republicans are considering a run, along with two Democrats and an independent. Candidates will run on a single all-party ballot on March 10. If no one wins a majority outright, the two top vote-getters will go to an April 7 runoff.

Indiana

US REP. JIM BAIRD EXPECTED TO MAKE A FULL RECOVERY FOLLOWING CAR ACCIDENT

Republican U.S. Rep. Jim Baird of Indiana is recovering from a car crash and is expected to make a full recovery. A statement from Baird's office says he is recovering, but details of the crash are not immediately clear. During remarks made while speaking to GOP House members at the Kennedy Center, President Donald Trump said the accident was "pretty bad" but that Baird and his wife, who was also involved in the crash, are "going to be fine." Baird was first elected in 2019 and represents west central Indiana.

Kentucky

FEDERAL JUDGE DISMISSES LOUISVILLE POLICE REFORM AGREEMENT

LOUISVILLE — A federal judge in Kentucky has dismissed Louisville's proposed settlement with the U.S. Department of Justice. The agreement, known as a consent decree, was intended to trigger police reforms. But the Department of Justice withdrew its support for those proposed reforms in Louisville and Minneapolis in May. The reform plans were brought by the DOJ during the Biden administration and were spurred by the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020. Federal Judge Benjamin Beaton wrote in a ruling this week that Louisville's police reforms should be conducted without federal involvement.

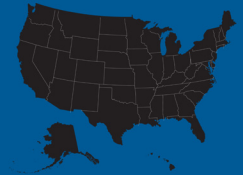
Louisiana

VIOLENT CRIME FELL FOR 3RD STRAIGHT YEAR IN NEW ORLEANS, WHERE GUARD TROOPS PATROL

NEW ORLEANS — New Orleans ended 2025 with its third year of declining violent crime rates, even as armed National Guard troops patrolled the city's streets on the orders of President Donald Trump. New Orleans Police Chief Anne Kirkpatrick touted a significant decrease in murders, armed robberies, shootings and carjackings since 2022. The armed National Guard troops have been deployed around the city's historic French Quarter for about a week. Local officials pushed back for months against the possibility of a Guard mission in New Orleans, pointing out that crime was already decreasing and that troops aren't trained to arrest and jail people.

FROM OTHER STATES

NEWS OF INTEREST FROM ACROSS THE NATION



Minnesota

WALZ SAYS HE DOESN'T KNOW WHAT FUTURE HOLDS FOR HIM

MINNEAPOLIS — The political fortunes of Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz were looking bright in the summer of 2024, when Kamala Harris chose him as her running mate. He was seen as a rising star in the Democratic Party, but Walz, under fire for fraud in government programs, abandoned his quest for a third term as governor. Walz told reporters he doesn't know what his future holds. He said he expects to be tied up for the next year fighting off the Trump administration's targeting of Minnesota. He didn't rule out a return to education someday, saying he was a "really good geography teacher."

Mississippi

HOW STATE COULD MEET THE NEEDS OF FAMILIES WAITING FOR CHILD CARE VOUCHERS

More than 19,000 Mississippi families lost access to child care vouchers after pandemic-era funding that helped support the program ran out. The pandemic funding didn't expand eligibility, it just helped the state better meet the demand. Child care advocates say there's a way for Mississippi to spend more of its \$90 million federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families block grant on child care. They also note that Mississippi has about \$156 million in unspent TANF funds. The state human services department says it has opened a request for proposals for work supports — programs that could help low-income workers stay employed. That could include child care, but may not.

Montana

SCHOOL BRINGS COLLEGE DEGREE PROGRAM TO ELEMENTARY SETTING

An elementary school in north-central Montana isn't just teaching students. It's teaching future teachers. Morningside Elementary in Great Falls operates a charter school that also pairs with the University of Montana-Western to offer education students a chance to learn on the job. Morningside's teachers all have master's degrees so they can serve as adjunct professors and teach classes to the college students. The college students also have paid work in the classrooms and take some required degree coursework online. Officials say it offers the college students the equivalent of an apprenticeship. Their tuition, at least so far, has been covered by grants.

Nebraska

FARMERS CAN LEARN HOW MUCH AID THEY WILL GET FROM TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

OMAHA — Farmers are now learning how much aid they can expect to receive from a \$12 billion package that President Donald Trump announced earlier this month. The U.S. Department of Agriculture released figures on the amount of aid per acre farmers can expect for each row crop. The details arrived after most farmers had already met with their bankers to arrange financing for next year's crops and placed orders for the seed and fertilizer they will need.

Nevada

A'S RELOCATION HITS SPEEDBUMP WITH TRADEMARK DENIAL

LAS VEGAS — The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office has for now denied the A's request to trademark the names "Las Vegas Athletics" and "Vegas Athletics." The club plans to move to Nevada in 2028. The A's have three months from Dec. 29 to ask for an extension to file a new application. The office said the nickname "Athletics" was too generic, despite its long history with the team. A new stadium on the Las Vegas Strip is under construction and set to open in 2028.

North Carolina

TOWN IS RETURNING LAND TO EASTERN BAND OF CHEROKEE INDIANS

The Noquisiyi Mound in Franklin, North Carolina, is close to being returned to the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. A city council voted unanimously to return the land. The mound, part of a Cherokee mother town, has been privately owned since the 1940s. The site will be part of a cultural corridor the tribal nation is establishing, including an interpretive center next to the site.

Ohio

GOVERNOR RACE TAKES SHAPE AS RAMASWAMY AND ACTON PICK RUNNING MATES

COLUMBUS — In Ohio's gubernatorial race, Republican Vivek Ramaswamy and Democrat Amy Acton have announced their running mates. Ramaswamy, a biotech executive, has chosen Ohio Senate President Rob McColley, a seasoned conservative lawmaker. Acton, a former state health chief, has picked David Pepper, a pragmatic former state Democratic Chair. Ramaswamy praised McColley for his legislative experience.

Pennsylvania

TRUMP STORE HAS 'KIND OF RUN ITS COURSE' AND IS SET TO CLOSE

BENSALEM — A suburban Philadelphia shop selling President Donald Trump-themed merchandise that became a magnet for die-hard supporters announced it's closing its doors, six years after opening. The Trump Store, which sells hats, flags, T-shirts and other items in hotly contested Bucks County, posted on social media that its storefront will close at the end of the month. Owner Mike Domanico said in a phone interview that he's closing the store because he's focusing on another business, selling targets and other items at gun shows, and he's semi-retired, he said.

Texas

UNION LAWSUIT: STATE CRACKED DOWN ON TEACHERS FOR POSTS ABOUT CHARLIE KIRK

A teachers' union in Texas is suing the state's education department and accusing it of improperly investigating teachers and other public school employees over social media comments following the killing of conservative political activist Charlie Kirk. The lawsuit, filed in U.S. District Court in Austin by the Texas American Federation of Teachers, argues that the Texas Education Agency and Commissioner Mike Morath have violated the free speech rights of teachers and other public school employees. In September, Morath directed local school districts to document "vile content" posted online by educators following Kirk's fatal shooting in September on a Utah college campus.

Wisconsin

MAN ACCUSED OF STALKING SUPREME COURT JUSTICE GETS PROBATION

MADISON — A Wisconsin man accused of sending the state Supreme Court's chief justice intimidating emails has been sentenced to probation. Ryan Thornton was charged in October with felony stalking and misdemeanor intimidation and disorderly conduct. According to a criminal complaint, the 37-year-old sent Chief Justice Jill Karofsky emails this past fall accusing her of being manipulative, telling her to "eject" herself from office and asking for her home address. Online court records indicate prosecutors dismissed the stalking charge. Thornton pleaded guilty to the misdemeanor counts and was sentenced to two years on probation. He was also ordered to have no contact with Karofsky and was banned from Dane County, where the court chambers are located.

INSIDER NEWS

BILL TRACKING

KEYWORD ALERTS

HEARINGS + TRANSCRIPTIONS

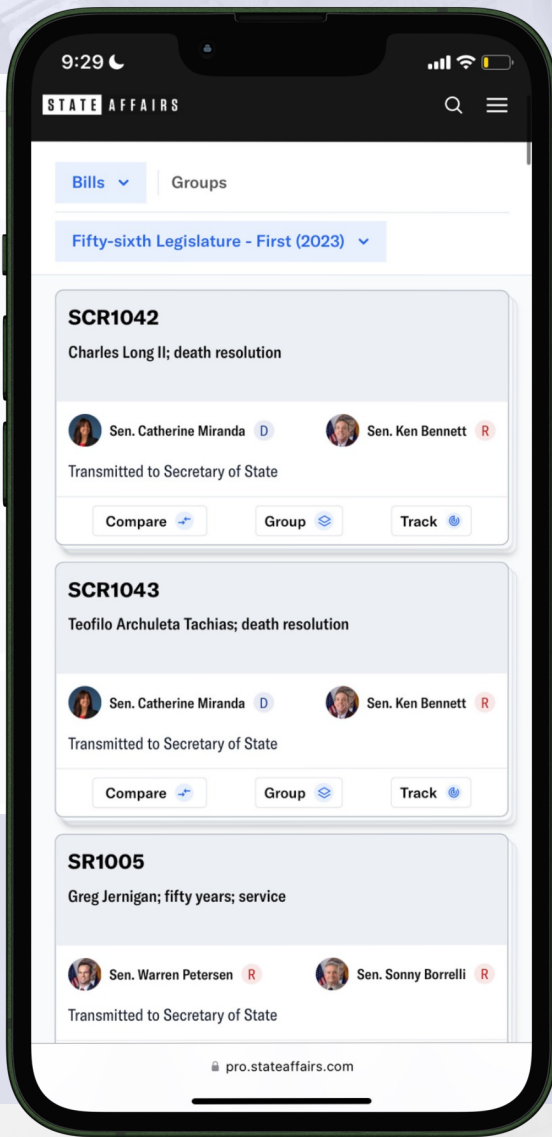
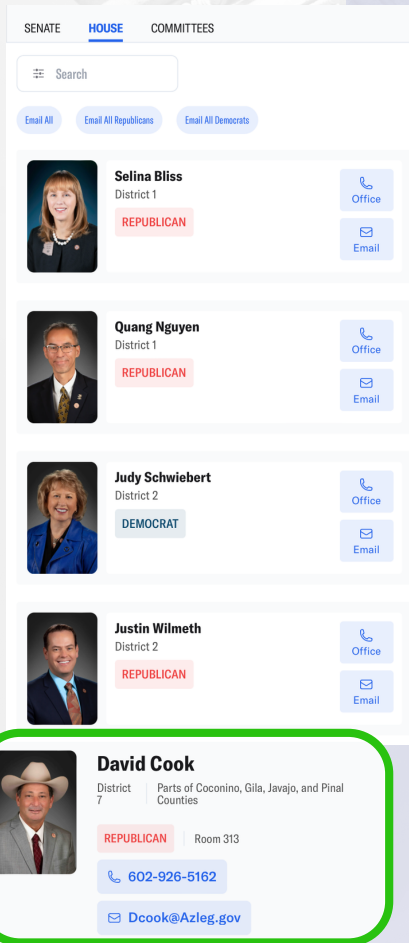
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