



*Session update from Olympia*

*January 27, 2012*

### **Greetings.**

The snow and rain that knocked out power to thousands of homes across the South Sound last week made business in Olympia difficult. The conditions forced the cancellation of several Senate committee hearings on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday last week.

Legislative staff continued to work despite the difficulties until the campus lost all power on Friday and all legislative buildings were shut down by security staff. Power was thankfully restored over the weekend, as it was to most of the homes in the region, and business resumed in full on Monday of this week.

### **Town hall meeting set for Feb. 18**

Please join Representatives Hunter, Eddy and myself for a town hall meeting Saturday, February 18, to discuss progress made thus far in the 2012 legislative session.

We will be answering questions from 10 a.m. to noon in the Redmond City Hall Council Chamber at 15670 Northeast 85th Street, Redmond, WA. Click [here](#) for directions.

### **Contact Information:**

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### **Financial counseling for college students**

At a time when many Washington students are plunging deeply into debt in order to earn college diplomas, legislation proposed in the Senate last week would help them better understand the ramifications of that debt.

[Senate Bill 6121](#), of which I am a sponsor, would require colleges and universities to provide financial aid counseling curriculum to aid students who apply for financial aid. Under current guidelines, some universities provide online and written information for students, but offer no incentive for the students to thoroughly read and research what they are signing up for. As a result, many students end up saddled with six-figure debts

upon graduation, prepared for a career they might love, but in a job that doesn't provide the income potential to pay off their student loan debt in a manageable way.

To heighten awareness, the bill would require that colleges and universities set a curriculum to include student loan performance requirements and repayment rules, an overview of financial literacy, including basic money management skills, and perspectives from a diverse group of students who had received financial aid in the past. As chair of the Senate Higher Education Committee, I'm proud of positive bipartisan support the bill has received, and expect to vote it out of committee next week.

### **Dilapidated roads, ferry eliminations an increasing state concern**

The state's declining gas tax revenue will create a \$3 billion deficit over the next 10 years, according to the governor's office in a report to the Senate Transportation Committee this week. This is a critical concern as construction of the new 520 bridge continues to unfold.

Gov. Chris Gregoire has proposed a series of measures that would generate the money to close the \$3 billion gap, chief among them a \$1.50 per-barrel fee on oil among other proposals. You can [read more about those proposals here](#).

If the state does not make up the \$3 billion in lost revenue, impacts would range from:

- Deterioration of pavement and road quality;
- Elimination of ferry service on five routes plus reductions in service on two routes;
- Reduced accident response time and longer backups;
- More snow, ice and slush on roads for longer duration;
- More damage and unrepaired guard rails on roads;
- Increased road closures from flooding and erosion from backed-up culverts.



### **Marriage equality hearing closely watched**

In a two-hour hearing over an intensely personal issue for many Washingtonians, supporters and opponents of legislation to allow same-sex marriage took turns making their case this week in a hearing that was a model for respectful debate.

The hearing drew hundreds of participants and intense observers, with some conducting outdoor rallies, but throughout the hearing both sides expressed their views calmly and courteously. The overflow crowd filled not just the committee hearing room but a second hearing room, a conference room and the Senate galleries, where the hearing was telecast live via TVW on large screens.

You can [read more about the legislation here](#).

### **Unemployment and jobs both drop in December**

Labor statistics from the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics paint a conflicting picture for our state for the month of December. The bureau's monthly survey of Washington households indicates that the

unemployment rate here dropped from 8.7 percent in November to 8.5 percent in December, which is good. Unemployment hasn't been this low in nearly three years, when it was at 8.3 percent in February 2009.

At the same time, however, the bureau's statistics also show a loss of about 10,700 jobs from November to December. Analysts at the state Employment Security Department warn that the federal numbers tend to be volatile and that a single month of numbers is not a reliable indicator of what's happening in the job market. A more reliable measure is what is happening over time, and over time they say jobs are gradually increasing and the unemployment rate is dropping.

You can [read the department's full report here](#).

### **Stay in touch!**

Should you have any questions or concerns, please contact me. I try as best as I can to give you a personal response, instead of a rubberstamping some form letter. As always, it is an honor to serve you.

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think Peace!

Rodney Tom