



# Representative Andrew Wenthe Statehouse News

March 29, 2007

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For additional information, check our web site at: [www.iowahouse.org](http://www.iowahouse.org) or [www.andrewwenthe.org](http://www.andrewwenthe.org)

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## Capitol Comments

The three-hour drive home to Hawkeye can sometimes be a long haul after a busy week in the legislature. But the drive is always more enjoyable when I know our work in the Capitol has been productive, and I am happy to report that tonight's drive should be satisfying. We passed two bold and progressive bills in the past week, both that I campaigned heavily on during my election, and I believe these pieces of legislation will improve the quality of life in rural Iowa.

First, the House approved a bill allowing small businesses to pool their purchasing power to get better rates on health insurance for their employees. It became clear when I knocked on people's doors and talked with businesses owners during my campaign that Iowa's small businesses need help with rising health care costs, and allowing small businesses to pool their efforts will provide some relief. Our legislation also provides wellness incentives to help reduce long-term health care costs. This bill provides the first step toward lowering health care costs for working families and providing necessary support for small businesses in rural Iowa.

Second, the House voted to begin to expand access to quality, affordable preschool for the 29,000 four year olds in Iowa who do not have access to preschool. Every Iowa child deserves the opportunity to attend a quality preschool so they are prepared when they enter kindergarten. Expanding access to quality, affordable preschool is the next step in making Iowa a world leader in education.

It is important to note that the bill does not compete with existing private or public preschools, but instead encourages cooperation and collaboration between school boards, local empowerment groups, and existing private or public preschools. The program is voluntary, and no four-year old will be required to attend a preschool. You can learn more details about both of these bills later in the newsletter.

On Wednesday, several librarians from the district visited the Capitol to advocate for the State Libraries and the Library Service Areas that serve as the backbone of Iowa's public library system. Susan Macke of the Oelwein Public Library shared some information about the city's beautiful new library that illustrates how vital an asset a library is to its community. In the first six months the new Oelwein library was open, 18,581 people were welcomed through the door. Public libraries offer a tremendous service to all people who take advantage of their resources, and I have been proud to support libraries with my work on the Education Appropriations Subcommittee.



Andrew whipping up an omelet while serving as a guest cook at the Bremer County 4-H fundraiser.



Derek Heins (left) of First National Bank, West Union and Jon King of First National Bank, Oelwein visited the Capitol as part of an Iowa Bankers Association Leadership Conference.



Rep. Wenthe visits Pastor William Horn and his family at the Iowa State Capital. Pastor Horn is from Trinity Lutheran Church in Hawkeye where Rep. Wenthe is a member of the congregation.

## UPCOMING LISTENING POSTS FRIDAY, MARCH 30<sup>TH</sup>

**Oelwein – 9:30am**

Oelwein Public Library

**Maynard – 10:30am**

Maynard Public Library

**West Union – 1:30pm**

West Union Community Library

**Clermont – 3:00pm**

Larrabee Building



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## Health Insurance Pools

In order to help small businesses control the high cost of health care, the Iowa House unanimously approved the formation of health insurance pools. The legislation allows trade associations to form these small employer health insurance pools. House File 790 will now go to the Senate for its approval.

Eligible associations must be formed for reasons other than health insurance and be in existence for five years before issuing a policy. It must also let any business meeting its qualifications to

join and cannot set conditions based on employee health status.

An eligible small employer is one with from two to fifty full-time employees who normally work at least 30 hours per week.

The bill retains existing small business rate limits: annual changes based on experience or employee health cannot exceed 15%; index rates cannot vary by more than 20% among business classes; and rates within a class cannot vary from the index rate by more than 25%.

### **Wellness Initiatives**

The bill also lets insurers offer incentives with any small employer policy, including premium credits or discounts, to encourage employees to participate in tobacco use cessation, and other wellness or disease management programs.

Since 88% of health insurance premiums pay actual claims, efficiencies from association pooling will only affect the remaining 12% of premium costs. Supporters of House File 790 believe that over the long run, expansion of wellness initiative will reduce future health claims.

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## Preschool Bill Passes House

House File 877 passed the Iowa House this week aimed at ensuring that 90 percent of four-

year olds will have access to a voluntary, affordable, and quality preschool education within the next

four years. We know that learning begins at birth, and those young children who have access to stimu-

lating childcare and preschool do better in school and are less likely to have drug and delinquency problems.

Iowa does not currently have a comprehensive preschool plan. As a result, there are some 29,000 four-year olds without access to quality preschools. Approximately half of families below 185% of federal poverty guidelines participate in public preschool programs. However, many families seeking availability of programs are finding it difficult to access quality programs.

House File 527 allows school districts to seek approval from the Department of Education to oversee or provide a preschool program within district boundaries. The programs must meet specific requirements, as set forth by the department, to insure that they are quality programs and taught by a teacher with early childhood education.

Attendance is still voluntary, and will serve those families that have four-year olds that want to attend preschool.

The program will cost \$15 million the first year, and funding is provided in the education budget bill to allow the program to begin for the 2007-2008 school year. In future years, a Preschool Allowable Growth formula will be used to increase funding, based on the previous year's preschool enrollment.

Improving early childhood education was another piece of the Democratic Plan for Prosperity. The bill now moves to the Senate for consideration.

## Blood Lead Testing Passes House

This week, the Iowa House voted 93-5 to pass House File 158, which requires all children entering school in Iowa to be tested for lead poisoning by the age of six. In addition, the bill encourages parents of young children to have a blood lead test by the age of two.



was used. Right now, almost 70 percent of Iowa children are tested and about 7 percent of those children have lead poisoning. Lead poisoning can lead to learning disabilities, behavioral problems and even death.

House File 158 is not a condition of enrollment for children entering school. The bill requires local school districts to inform parents at least 90 days before school starts of the requirement for a test. Parents have 60 days, after the beginning of the school year, to have their child tested for elevated blood lead levels. The local public health departments and school districts

will work with parents to have all children tested.

The bill has two waiver options for parents who do not want their children to have a blood lead test. If a child is determined not to be at high risk of lead poisoning, then the test may be waived. In addition, if a parent or legal guardian submits a signed affidavit stating that the blood lead test conflicts with a genuine and sincere religious belief, then the test may be waived.

House File 158 has been sent to the Senate Human Resources Committee for consideration.

## Teacher Quality Passes Education Committee

Senate File 277 passed the House Education Committee this week on a bi-partisan vote. The bill supports many of the initiatives set out by Governor Culver and Democratic Legislators.

The proposed bill will give school districts an additional \$70 million in an effort to raise teacher salaries. The goal is to take Iowa from its 42<sup>nd</sup> in the nation ranking on teacher salaries to the national median.

### Career Ladders

School districts have either not been able or have not had the necessary information to implement career ladders as it pertains to teacher compensation, although the law was implemented in 2001. In SF 277, a pilot project will address the current law on teacher career ladders to help identify best practices for districts. A report will be updated annually and sent to the General Assembly.

### Professional Development

Extra money is allotted for a second day of professional development. The bill appropriates \$20 million for professional development, with school districts having the discretion on how to use the additional funding, to promote quality professional development.

A new requirement for school districts will be the creation of a teacher quality committee, if one

does not already exist. The purpose of the committee is to ensure that professional development and teacher evaluations are being performed in the most beneficial manner.

School districts will also be required to have a school nurse for every 750 students and a guidance counselor for every 350 students. This does not preclude a district from sharing these positions.

SF 277 must go through the House Appropriations Committee before coming to the House Floor for consideration.

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## House Shows Support for People of Sudan

The Iowa House voted to restrict investments of public funds in companies doing business with Sudan. "Public funds" includes those funds invested by the Treasurer of State, the Iowa Public Employees Retirement System, the Peace Officers Retirement System, the Municipal Fire and Police Retirement System, the Judicial Retirement System and the state board of regents.

Senate File 361 disassociates the State of Iowa in a financially prudent manner from investing in Sudan. The federal government has prevented investments in Sudan because Sudan has been labeled a state that supports terrorism.

As approved by both the Iowa House and Senate, Senate File 361 is targeted to a group of companies that do not provide consumer services to the people of Sudan; therefore, the restriction on investments will not affect the people living in Sudan. Six states have enacted legislation similar to this and 24 states have legislation pending.

With passage of this legislation the General Assembly has expressed its concern over the human rights situation in Sudan and concurs with the United States policy, which has officially declared that genocide is ongoing in Sudan, and demands that the government of Sudan end these atrocities.



The General Assembly intends that state funds and funds administered by the state, including public employee retirement funds, should not be invested in companies that provide power production-related services, mineral extraction activities, oil-related activities, or military equipment to the government of Sudan, or are complicit in the genocide in Darfur.

The bill stipulates how companies are to be notified that the public fund shall sell, redeem, divest, or withdraw all publicly traded securities of the company if they continue to operate in Sudan or provide equipment to that country.

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## Governor Signs Interest Limit on Car Title Loans

Stating that, "Iowa will not tolerate unfair business practices," Governor Chet Culver signed legislation setting a maximum 21% interest rate on car title loans. House File 5 takes effect July 1, 2007.

This is the same maximum rate allowed for vehicle loans made by a bank, savings and loan, or credit

union and on all consumer loans. A consumer loan is \$25,000 or less, primarily for personal or family use.

The vehicle title loan industry took advantage of a loophole in Iowa law. By allowing periodic borrowing against an auto's value, \$300 now, \$200 next month, etc., a

loan is an open-end credit arrangement exempt from the 21% cap.

Iowa car title loan companies charged as much as 360% interest, something the Legislature never intended to allow on loans secured by a vehicle title. Companies could also take your car if you failed to makes payments.

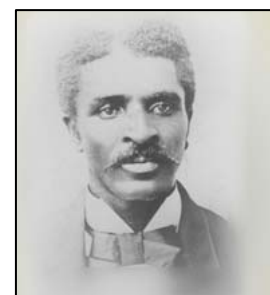
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## George Washington Carver Endowed Chair

Iowa State University is on its way to establishing an endowed chair position in the name of George Washington Carver. The House Appropriations Committee passed House File 518 to give the

initial money needed for ISU to create the position.

George Washington Carver is most notable for his achievements in agriculture through his teaching, research and outreach. He is an



alumnus of Iowa State University, has a building on the campus named after him, and received a posthumous award of an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters.

The most prestigious award a university can bestow upon a person is that of an endowed chair.

Creating the George Washington Carver Chair will require an endowment of \$1.5 million.

The bill appropriates \$250,000 for the establishment of the George Washington Carver Endowed Chair position. ISU will raise the remaining amount in a 2 to 1 match

through private sources such as alumni and friends of the University, businesses, and foundations.

House File 518 will move to the House Floor for debate. After passage in the House, the bill must go to the Senate for approval.

## More Iowa Great Places

The Iowa House and Senate have passed a bill that would allow more Iowa communities to be designated as Great Places. Last year, the program was capped at six Great Places. Under House File 647, if a community has met criteria to be a Great Place, they could now be selected. The bill now goes to Governor Culver for his signature.

The Great Places Program, through the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA), was created as a way for Iowa communities to develop the unique and authentic

qualities that make their city special. Last summer, teams went out into communities to help develop projects for the program.

The bill still requires communities to meet rigorous criteria to be selected. DCA will still be limited by financial resources and the amount of places they are physically able to help. However, there will be no cap on how many can be selected.

Current Great Places communities include Sioux City, Coon Rapids and Clinton from 2005. In 2006, Adams County, Dubuque,

Fairfield, Guttenberg, Jackson County, and Mason City were chosen.

These projects will receive financial assistance to develop their project, but also technical assistance from various state agencies. In addition, they will receive visibility through Iowa Lottery tickets and alcoholic beverage trucks.

The program assists with the development of a community's cultural activities and quality of life.

## Midwest Interstate Rail Compact

This week, the House passed House File 559, which enables Iowa to join the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Compact, as long as funding for membership is appropriated. This bill does not provide funding, and specifically states that funding cannot come from the road use tax fund, which is used for road projects at all levels of government.

The purposes of the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Compact include:

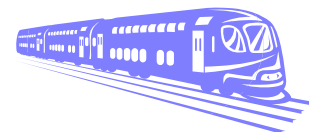
- Promoting, coordinating and supporting regional improvements to passenger rail service;
- Promoting the development and implementation of improvements and long-range plans for

inter-city passenger rail service in the Midwest;

- Coordinating interaction among Midwestern state officials, and among the public and private sector at all levels; and
- Supporting current state efforts being conducted through state Departments of Transportation

### Membership

Iowa is one of thirteen states that are eligible to join the compact, and currently, over half have joined. The other eligible states are Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, Wisconsin, and North and South Dakota. If Iowa were to join, we would have four



Iowa residents as members on the commission.

The duties of the commissioners include advocating for the funding and authorization necessary to make passenger rail improvements a reality for the region; cooperate with other state agencies, regions, and entities to ensure that the Midwest is adequately represented and integrated into national plans for passenger rail development; and adopting bylaws governing the activities and procedures of the commission. House File 559 has been sent to the Senate for their approval.

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## Cigarette Tax shows successes

On March 15<sup>th</sup>, less than 48 hours after the House passed the bill, Governor Culver signed the \$1.00 tax increase on a pack of cigarettes into law. Within a matter of days, calls to Quitline Iowa, a hot line to help smokers quit, more than tripled. As reported in the Des Moines Register, calls to the Quitline went from about 70 a week before the tax increase, to 230 calls in the week after the tax went into effect.

As I reflect on my decision to vote in favor of the cigarette tax, I look at the increase in Quitline calls as evidence that my vote was the right one.

It was our hope in the House that in passing the cigarette tax increase, more Iowans would quit and it is gratifying to know that we have thus far achieved our goal.

Quitline Iowa is just one of the resources available to people considering quitting. With the expected \$130 million in new funds to be generated this year, more programs devoted to the prevention and cessation of smoking will be created as well as other programs devoted to health care.

I would encourage anyone thinking of quitting to call Quitline Iowa at 1-866-822-2857. They are open from 8am to Midnight, seven days a week.