

Post Independent

Frenetic floor sessions create a battleground

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 April 1, 2007

DENVER - Jack Taylor is standing when he should be sitting.

Al White is lingering in the back of the Colorado Senate chambers although he is a member of the Colorado House.

Welcome to another day at the state Capitol.

It's about 10:30 on a Monday morning in late February, and the state Senate and House are in the middle of floor sessions. Their behavior might come as a surprise to a well-raised schoolchild. As these august bodies work their way through bills, half the time it seems that half the lawmakers aren't even paying attention.

Instead, they may be conferring with other lawmakers, or stepping outside to hear from lobbyists. Sometimes, it looks as if almost no one is listening to whoever is speaking about a bill.

What might come across as rudeness is a matter of simple reality. With thousands of votes to be cast each year, lawmakers can't possibly follow every issue with a keen interest. Instead they pick their battles and most closely track the legislation that matters most to them and their constituents.

"The people that are really interested in a subject will be there debating," said Taylor, R-Steamboat Springs.

As for other lawmakers: "When you look like you're not listening, you've got an ear tuned to it," he said.

Most of the time, anyway. At one point Monday morning Taylor had just spoken on the Senate floor against a proposal to increase the training requirement for agents to sell a certain type of insurance.



State Rep. Al White looks through his files for information on a house bill during an afternoon session while in session on the house floor.

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State Rep. Bernie Buescher, D-Grand Junction, right, crosses the aisle to talk with state Rep. Al White, R-Winter Park, about a school-funding measure while in session on the house floor on Feb. 26.

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But when the call came for those favoring the measure to stand, Taylor didn't hear it. As he stood in the back of the Senate chambers he almost found himself being counted among the supporters before he noticed and quickly stooped to the wine-red carpet. It didn't matter; the measure still passed without his vote.

There was little time to worry about the measure's outcome; it was on to the next bill. The hot one for the morning was a proposal by state Sen. Josh Penry, R-Grand Junction, whose district reaches as far east as Parachute/Battlement Mesa.

White, R-Winter Park, had ducked out of the House session in hopes of talking to Penry about a school-funding idea White had been pursuing that morning.

"But he's a little busy," White said as he watched Penry argue on behalf of making school districts adopt tougher graduation requirements in math and science. "It's a bad bill," whispered White, concerned about the measure's impacts on rural districts.

The Senate disagreed and approved it, with Taylor among those voting to let it keep going through the legislative process. "I think it's an issue that needs to be debated," he explained.

White's mission

White, 56, wants to bend Penry's ear about another education matter. He is proposing amending this year's School Finance Act to reduce the amount of variability in per-pupil funding between Colorado school districts. He wants to make it so no district receives less than 96 percent of the state average for that funding. He has been working on the idea all morning, almost from the moment he got finished with his NordicTrack workout to start the day.

He hopes to talk to Penry because Penry sits on the Senate Education Committee, and his district includes a Mesa County school system that now is near the bottom of the state ranking for per-pupil funding.

As White waits, Sen. Jim Isgar, a Democrat from the Durango area, joins him in the corner of the Senate chambers.

"Hey, you'll get my tourism bill for tomorrow," White tells Isgar. The two are soon joined by Taylor, as they stretch out their cowboy-booted legs in front of them.

The scene says much about regional versus partisan politics in Colorado. Oftentimes, Western Slope interests trump partisan ones - especially on issues such as water and tourism. In this case, White doesn't need to do any convincing of Isgar regarding his tourism bill. Isgar and Taylor also are sponsors of the measure. It seeks to eliminate current law that makes a year-old, \$19 million state tourism promotion fund susceptible to being reduced or lost in years when Colorado's budget suffers a downturn.

"I'd better get back over there," White says, nodding in the direction of the House chambers, unable to wait any longer for the debate on Penry's bill to end.

Soon both the House and Senate adjourn for lunch. For Taylor, it's off to a Capitol Hill dining spot frequented by lawmakers and lobbyists. As he's eating a cup of soup and sipping iced tea, a higher-education lobbyist tells Taylor she'd like to talk to him sometime. Taylor assumes it has to do with his concerns over a bill making it easier to use federal mineral lease dollars for higher education; he thinks Garfield and other counties impacted by energy development need more of that money.

"She probably got feedback that I don't support colleges and that's not true at all," said Taylor.

A Senate vote on the bill had been scheduled for that morning but was pushed back a day. But Taylor said it probably didn't matter; he had been trying to round up opposition all morning. "I couldn't get enough votes," he said.

After the lunch break, White walks back to the Capitol while talking to Gov. Bill Ritter's budget director about White's per-pupil funding plan. Once the House is back in session, White sits along a side wall of the House chambers, running his idea by state employees who are school finance and legal experts.

Soon, he rises to speak on a minor school transportation funding bill he is carrying.

"If any of you has any technical questions, just vote 'no' and we'll pass the bill anyway," he tells his colleagues, evoking laughter.

It passes and he sits back down. "Putty in my hands," he jokes.

Grin and bear it

White's sense of humor appears to be always at the ready, even when the joke is on him, as with the time fellow lawmakers sewed his suit coat to his chair. His ability to take politics seriously, but not too seriously, appears to win him admiration from Republican and Democrats alike.

Curry would remark about him later, "Al learned the art of carrying the bills instead of marrying them."



State Rep. Al White begins his morning Feb. 27 with an hour-long workout in his Denver condo as his wife, Jean, works on the computer.

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By that, she means he doesn't become too emotionally attached to them. Maybe it helps that White tries to eschew emotion-laden issues, preferring to push practical legislation that has a better chance of passage, such as the tourism promotion bill and another that targets the spruce beetle outbreak. He said he's not a fan of "fringe element" bills, many of them on social issues, and many pushed by his own party.

"I thought I was pretty conservative until I got down here," he said.

His stomach turns a little later when he learns the House will be voting the next day on a bill pushing for science-based standards for sex education. But he also cringes when told that abstinence groups are telling students condoms aren't effective in preventing HIV-AIDS.

"That's the best reason to support the bill," he said.

On this day, the House eventually turns its attention to an effort to try to loosen documentation requirements for driver's licenses, after legislation targeting illegal immigrants last year created difficulties for the public at large. Not everyone was excited by the revival of the hot-button immigration issue; one lawmaker who was tiring of a long day of House floor action found a partner to engage in a game of Hangman on a notepad.

White, however, as a member of the Joint Budget Committee (JBC), had something on his mind.

"I don't think I can just sit and listen," he said as he headed to the podium to get in line to speak.

He supported the bill, telling colleagues the JBC has determined last year's illegal immigration legislation so far has cost the state \$3 million and has yet to save it a cent.

White wasn't the only one frustrated with the flaws of last year's legislation. The measure passed unanimously.

Working his bill

The day's voting had reached its end but White's work continued. State Rep. Bernie Buescher, a Grand Junction Democrat, crossed the literal aisle separating the two political parties on the House floor to speak to White about his per-pupil school-funding idea. Buescher, vice chair of the JBC, liked the idea but preferred to see it introduced as its own measure rather than as part of the school finance act.

White told Buescher he would do that only as a last resort. He thinks he has a better chance of getting the concept approved as part of the larger education bill.

"It's likely to draw less heat wrapped in that vehicle," White later explained, speaking as someone with six years of experience in "working" bills.

White had to go testify briefly at a committee hearing on a mental health services bill he was carrying. But first he answered some questions from longtime Denver Post legislative columnist Fred Brown about White's proposal to require 60 percent rather than 50 percent voter approval for future state constitutional amendments.

Then he was out the door and heading across the street, past a homeless person receiving some kind of medical attention on the Capitol steps, and on to an adjunct legislative building to deliver his committee testimony.

"Geez, I think I just brought the wrong bill," he mumbled to himself as he walked.

Meanwhile, Taylor has returned to his office, where he has pulled off his boots and is returning phone calls after his aide has spread out stacks of messages on his desk. He stretches his stockinged feet out on the corner of the desk and yawns as he talks about a decision he faces about a bill that would pay for more judges, but take money away from highways in the process.

"It's the age-old argument, where's (state money) going to come from and who's going to get it?" he said.

There's a knock on his door. A senator and a lobbyist are standing outside.

"Some people coming to see me about another problem," Taylor explains, then lets them in.

"Oh, look at your cute little fuzzy socks," the lobbyist says disarmingly before sitting down to try to win Taylor's support on more serious matters.

It's 5:20 p.m. Returning the phone calls would have to wait.

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