

TISPC – NC Legislative Report

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Top Stories

House Advances Bill to Increase Unemployment Benefits and Employer Tax Credit

House Bill 48, which ratifies Gov. Roy Cooper’s executive order increasing unemployment benefits in response to Hurricane Helene, was approved by the House Finance Committee and re-referred to House Rules. The bill raises the maximum weekly unemployment benefit cap from \$350 to \$400 statewide and grants employers a tax credit for contributions made in the fourth quarter of 2024.

Gov. Cooper’s executive order, issued in October 2024, raised the cap to \$600 for 26 weeks, citing the Legislature’s absence when the hurricane struck. Some lawmakers questioned the legal authority of the move, but Rep. Julia C. Howard (R-Davie) acknowledged its necessity, stating, “It was something that needed to be done.”

A key Democratic concern was a provision stating that future expansions of unemployment benefits by the governor would be void unless enacted by the General Assembly. Rep. Deb Butler (D-New Hanover) proposed an amendment to remove this restriction, but it failed. However, a second amendment raising the cap to \$450 passed unanimously, with fiscal research staff confirming the unemployment trust fund could sustain the increase.

The bill now heads to the Senate, where potential changes remain uncertain. With a new Senate chairman appointed to the unemployment insurance committee, further discussions are expected in the long session.

Legislators Propose State-Run Retirement Savings Plan for Private Workers

House Bill 79, North Carolina Work and Save, aims to establish a state-run retirement savings program for private-sector workers who lack employer-sponsored retirement plans. The bill, backed by Rep. Jarrod Lowery (R-Robeson) and AARP North Carolina, seeks to help the more than half of North Carolina workers without access to a retirement savings option.

The program would function similarly to a 529 college savings plan, allowing automatic paycheck deductions into portable IRAs, ensuring workers can continue saving even as they change jobs. AARP’s research indicates that nearly 2 million North Carolinians work for companies without traditional pensions or retirement plans, particularly at small businesses with fewer than 25 employees.

Supporters argue that automatic payroll deductions significantly increase savings participation, with Americans being 70% more likely to save when funds are withdrawn automatically. Lawmakers propose allocating \$1 million over two years to establish the program, reinforcing North Carolina’s commitment to retirement security.

Senate Passes Bill Requiring Disclosure of Health Insurance Mandate Costs

The North Carolina Senate passed Senate Bill 24, which requires the disclosure of costs associated with state-mandated health insurance benefits. The bill, sponsored by Sen. Jim Burgin (R-Harnett), has

received support from the North Carolina Chapter of Independent Insurance Agents, the Chamber of Commerce, and the National Federation of Independent Business.

The legislation was driven by rising costs in the state health plan, including \$869 million transferred from reserve funds since 2020. Burgin emphasized the need for greater transparency in how government-mandated health benefits contribute to healthcare costs.

Opposition from Democrats focused on the bill's potential to create conflicts between patients, businesses, and healthcare providers rather than addressing systemic cost drivers. Sen. Jay J. Chaudhuri (D-Wake) proposed an amendment to establish a study committee on healthcare costs and outcomes, citing North Carolina as the most expensive state for healthcare, according to Forbes Advisor. However, the amendment failed.

Senate Bill 24 now moves to the House for further consideration.

House Advances \$500 Million Hurricane Helene Recovery Package

North Carolina House lawmakers moved forward with a \$500 million Republican-led recovery package to assist areas affected by Hurricane Helene, prioritizing home repairs, private roads and bridges, agricultural losses, and small business infrastructure rebuilding. The House's budget-writing committee approved the plan, with further amendments expected before a House floor vote next week.

The proposal is less than half of the \$1.07 billion requested by Gov. Josh Stein, whose plan includes direct payments to small businesses and local government reimbursements, provisions not included in the House version. Senate Republicans are expected to introduce their own recovery plan, setting up negotiations between chambers.

Since last fall, nearly \$1 billion has already been allocated for storm recovery efforts. Lawmakers are working to maximize federal matching funds, with Congress approving over \$15 billion in federal relief for North Carolina.

Key adjustments made this week include:

- \$75 million shifted to the State Agriculture Department for crop and infrastructure loss relief.
- \$55 million redirected from state facility repairs to local governments for small business-supporting infrastructure (such as utilities and broadband), instead of direct grants.

Democrats, led by Rep. Eric Ager (D-Buncombe), pushed for direct payments to small businesses, aligning with Stein's proposal. Ager withdrew his amendment but indicated efforts would continue to secure financial relief for struggling businesses.

Senate Republicans are also considering a forgivable loan program as an alternative to outright grants. Senate leader Phil Berger emphasized the need for a separate Helene recovery bill but did not comment on whether the House's proposed \$500 million package is sufficient.

Rockingham Sheriff Sam Page Announces Primary Challenge Against Senate Leader Phil Berger

Rockingham County Sheriff Sam Page has announced his candidacy for the 2026 Republican primary against Senate President Pro Tempore Phil Berger, one of the most powerful lawmakers in North

Carolina. Page, who previously ran unsuccessfully for lieutenant governor in 2024, has long been at odds with Berger, particularly over the casino gambling proposal for Rockingham County.

A vocal supporter of Donald Trump and border security policies, Page is centering his campaign on public safety, the opioid crisis, and school resource officers. He criticized Berger for a lack of transparency on controversial issues and said the district should have had more say in the casino debate.

Berger has not yet announced his reelection plans but noted that the filing period does not begin until December. If Page wins, he would join the Senate as a rank-and-file member, a stark contrast to Berger's years of leadership in the chamber.

Meredith Poll Shows Strong Early Approval for Gov. Stein, Support for Casinos, Marijuana Legalization

A new Meredith College Poll shows 58% of North Carolinians approve of Gov. Josh Stein's job performance in his first month, with bipartisan support likely driven by his Hurricane Helene relief efforts. His approval includes 65% of Democrats, 54% of Republicans, and 55% of unaffiliated voters.

The poll also gauged public opinion on key issues:

- Casino Gambling: 58% of North Carolinians support legalizing casinos outside of tribal land, with backing across party lines.
- Marijuana Legalization: 71% favor legalizing medical marijuana, including conservatives, echoing past polls.
- Lumbee Recognition: Two-thirds of voters support full federal recognition of the Lumbee Tribe.

While Stein's approval is high, pollsters warn it may decline as budget battles with the Republican-led General Assembly escalate.

The General Assembly adjourned on Thursday and will reconvene on Monday, February 17.

Bills of Interest

House Bill 77, Environmental Justice, seeks to enhance environmental permitting processes by requiring agencies to consider the cumulative impact of proposed projects on low-income and minority communities. The bill mandates that when evaluating permits for mining operations, solid waste facilities, hazardous waste sites, and major infrastructure projects, regulators must assess whether the project disproportionately affects vulnerable populations. Additionally, it establishes enhanced public participation requirements, including public hearings and extended public comment periods for affected communities. The bill applies to projects reviewed under state environmental laws, including air and water quality permits, and takes effect July 1, 2025.

Introduced by Reps. Harrison (D), F. Jackson (D), R. Pierce (D), Lopez (D) and referred to the House Rules Committee.

House Bill 84, The Pollinator Protection Act, aims to restrict the use and sale of neonicotinoid pesticides, a class of chemicals linked to declining pollinator populations such as honeybees. The bill prohibits retail sales of these pesticides to the general public unless the seller is authorized to sell restricted-use pesticides. Additionally, it limits pesticide use to licensed applicators, farmers, and veterinarians. The North Carolina Pesticide Board is directed to monitor EPA risk assessments on these

chemicals and report any needed legislative or regulatory changes to further protect pollinators. The bill also requires a study on insecticide-treated seeds, evaluating whether the state should regulate their use and sale. If enacted, the pesticide restrictions take effect October 1, 2025, while the remaining provisions become law immediately.

Introduced by Reps. Ager (D), Setzer (R), Harrison (D), Prather (D) and referred to the House Rules Committee.

House Bill 103, NC Am. Indian Hunting/Fishing Rights, proposes exempting North Carolina tribal members from hunting, trapping, and fishing license requirements, both on and off tribal lands.

The bill amends G.S. 113-276(l1) to expand current exemptions as follows:

1. On Tribal Land – Members of state-recognized tribes can hunt, trap, or fish without a state license on real property owned by their tribe. They must carry tribal identification and provide it to wildlife officers upon request.
2. Off Tribal Land – North Carolina residents who are members of state- or federally recognized tribes may hunt, trap, or fish anywhere in the state without a license. They must:
 1. Carry and present valid tribal or Native nation identification upon request.
 2. Follow all hunting/fishing laws applicable to licensed individuals, including reporting requirements, hunter education, and federal migratory waterfowl stamp requirements.
 3. Obtain specialized permits for activities governed under Articles 14A, 14B, or 25A, which include controlled hunting and fishing permits.

If enacted, the law would take effect October 1, 2025.

Introduced by Rep. Pierce (D), Clampitt (R), Lowery (R), Ward (R) and referred to the House Federal Relations and American Indian Affairs Committee.

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