

Legislative briefing

Business property taxes

PHOENIX - Arizona's House Ways and Means Committee voted Monday to slash what businesses pay in property taxes by 20 percent over the next five years.

HB 2508 is designed to reduce the disparity between what is paid by owners of residential versus business property. Residential property is valued for tax purposes at 10 percent of its market value; businesses pay at 25 percent. That means a \$250,000 business pays 2 1/2 times as much in property taxes as an identically valued home.

Rep. Steve Huffman, R-Tucson, said that disparity makes Arizona non-competitive in attracting and retaining business.

The measure is crafted to increase the share the state pays of each homeowner's local school taxes to prevent the lower taxes paid by business from driving up residential levies. But if the measure is approved by the Legislature and signed into law, the net result would be a cost of more than \$108 million a year in state tax dollars when it's fully implemented in 2010.

Patriot Act criticism

PHOENIX - A coalition of Arizona liberals and conservatives united Monday to urge Congress to strip the Patriot Act of provisions that deprive people of their "fundamental civil rights and liberties."

Eleanor Eisenberg, Arizona Civil Liberties Union director, said the most troubling aspects of the law give federal agencies the power to conduct searches and subpoena documents without getting court approval.

The unanimous vote sends SCR (Senate Concurrent Resolution) 1031 to the full Senate. The measure, approved by the Senate Judiciary Committee, has no legal effect but sends a message to Congress.

Seniors' jury service

PHOENIX - The Arizona House and Senate gave final approval Monday to separate measures designed to make it easier for seniors to escape jury service.

HB 2305 permits anyone age 75 or older to receive a permanent excuse from having to serve on a jury. That measure also permits the jury commissioner to excuse anyone else for good cause.

That measure now goes to the Senate. But the Senate on Monday approved its own, more restrictive bill. SB 1003 says those at least 75 can seek an exemption - but only if they can show lack of transportation or other undue hardship.

Rights for gay couples

A first-term lawmaker has introduced measures designed to give many of the same rights and responsibilities to gay couples as married couples have.

The proposal by Rep. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Phoenix, would extend state laws on community property, inheritance, adoption, medical decisions, life insurance and other statutes to couples registered with the state as domestic partners. It also would require partners who want to break up to go through the same procedures as a married

couple seeking divorce.

One of her measures is written as a constitutional amendment, designed to go head-to-head on the 2006 state ballot with a proposal to ban not only gay marriage but also civil unions and domestic partner benefits for public employees.

Sinema said if her proposal does not pass, sponsoring organizations will try to qualify it for the statewide ballot.

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