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GENERAL SESSION

January 23, 2013

Program: Looking Ahead – The 2013 Legislative Session

Presented by: Bette Voorhees – WSLC 1st Vice-President

***Speaker: Rebecca Lockhart (R) Dist. 64, Utah County (south-central)
– Speaker of the Utah House of Representatives***

Speaker Lockhart began her remarks by noting that the state House of Representatives will open the 2013 Session with 19 freshman comprising 25% of that body. The average stay of Utah legislators is 5.5 years. Ms. Lockhart quipped that those figures should put to rest any further talk about the need for term limits in Utah.

The Republican Caucus numbers 16 members, the largest in the history of the state. The Speaker has served for 15 years and is the second-most senior legislator. She said there is a particularly interesting dynamic this session as there are 31 members who have less than 2 years' experience in the legislature. Ms. Lockhart finds the House a more lively and exciting place

than the Senate, which is more staid and formal.

Continuing, she said the state budget will overshadow the whole 2013 Session. Probably the most important thing legislators do is spend taxpayer dollars. Utah has been largely successful in maintaining its balance during the national economic downturn. However, with the national healthcare mandate looming on the horizon, economic uncertainties in our state make predictions difficult. This Session opens with Utah scheduled to receive some one-time federal revenue, as well as some ongoing revenue.

Underscoring the fact that decisions made in Washington have a direct effect on Utah, Speaker Lockhart said

we don't yet know exactly how the recent accord in Congress relating to the national debt ceiling will affect us. Utah may have less than \$300M in federal money to apply to its programs. Fiscal analysts in our legislature have traditionally been quite accurate in predicting state budget needs.

By the middle of February, the legislators will know what monies are available. Until then, they must assume the numbers will be "flat" or the same as last year, as they begin their deliberations. Then, if they find more revenue is forthcoming, it will be all to the good.



There will be an accelerated debate relating to guns this Session. The Speaker hastened to add that it is not at all unusual for the Utah legislature to deliberate over gun bills. It happens every year. However, in light of the recent school shooting, the national

dialogue is more urgent and heated. Ms. Lockhart anticipates that Utah's discourse will reflect the passionate public mood.

Utah has joined several other states to bring suit against "Obamacare." The Supreme Court found the Affordable Health Care Act to be constitutional. At the same time, however, it ruled that states cannot be forced to "expand an established federal program." Ms. Lockhart considers that part of the ruling to be a decided victory for the states.

The Affordable Health Care Act mandate will require all to join a Health Exchange. Applicants must be evaluated to determine whether they qualify for Medicaid. Currently, Utah residents may qualify, but choose not to enter the Medicaid program. Under the mandate, that will no longer be the case. A \$1B increase is projected just to cover this expanded enrollment. An additional \$2B increase will be needed to service it.

Speaker Lockhart stated the Medicaid expansion has the potential to overwhelm the state budget if legislators cannot find the revenue to support it. She believes the executive branch of the federal government has usurped legislative power in this mandate to the states. The federal government is supposed to pay 100% of the cost the first year, and 90% thereafter. This, she believes, will not be so. First, because the U.S. is deeply in debt and cannot afford the

behemoth costs. Second, because the next congress is not bound to hold to the promises made by the current one.

Utah's 2013 Session will also be defined by a continuing immigration debate. The Utah Compact supported a bill (HB116) last year that was contingent upon a congressional waiver. That waiver has not been granted. Utah will undoubtedly remain in need of workable immigration reform.

Responding to questions, Ms. Lockhart said there seems to be less of a broad philosophical mandate this year in the legislature than was exhibited a couple of years ago (i.e.

the Tea Party candidates). She believes Medicaid will emerge as a priority when it comes to spending. For example, will the state need to reduce benefits (vision & dental) for existing recipients in order to expand coverage? How new state health care spending will affect our education spending remains to be seen. Utah's natural resources could provide a sizeable portion of its budget revenue. Ms. Lockhart also does not believe the correctional facility at the point of the mountain will be relocated without aggressive leadership from Utah's executive branch.

Reported by Pam Grange

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President:	Sylvia Rickard
Advisor:	Bette Voorhees
Editor:	Pam Grange
Assist. Editor:	Eileen Hallet Stone

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