50 STATE PROJECT

A report on the top state issues of 2016 by the reporters who cover them.

SPRING 2016
Includes All 50 states + D.C. and Puerto Rico
April 18, 2016

Welcome to our third edition of the 50 State Project!

When CQ Roll Call launched the first edition last year, we had no idea what to expect. What has materialized since then is an unrivaled snapshot of state issues.

This resource, which is free of charge, has been downloaded thousands of times. It was written about in the Washington Post and other publications. And it continues to evolve.

More than 52 authors from every state in the nation contributed to the latest edition, offering their unique ability to synthesize the most complex issues faced by governors and legislatures.

Despite the growth of this report, our mission remains the same: to find out what drives state lawmakers to pass tens of thousands of bills each session, and which issues get the most attention.

We hope you find this to be a valuable resource.

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INTRODUCTION

Budget and Taxes Remain on Top

Budget and taxes took the top spot again this year among the issues rated highest by our team of journalists. It also led in overall top five mentions, getting 34, and topping education, which was first in the last edition.

Some of the budget talk is positive, with California, Tennessee and Minnesota making plans to spend surpluses. But other states, such as Alabama who is heading into the red by $250 million for the third straight year, are trending in the opposite direction.

Then there’s Alaska, which is in its own category. The state is set to close the year with a deficit of $3.8 billion, but because of ample state reserves, it is not expected to feel the pinch. Despite the large supply of cash, there is a question of how long the state can continue at this pace.

Arizona too is unique. Gov. Doug Ducey has pledged to reduce taxes every year he’s in office, and he’s one-for-one so far. But will his streak continue?

The other trends you will find throughout the report are revenue tied to volatile sources of income, and the crushing burden of healthcare costs. In Delaware, unclaimed property and corporate franchise taxes are big earners, but could in the future lead to unfunded mandates.

Education

From funding issues to testing, education remains one of the most important topics at the state level, and a huge driver of state budgets. Of all the issues reporters indentified in their states, more than one-in-ten centered on education.

In Colorado, inadequate funding could lead the state into legal trouble. The state ranks in the bottom quartile in per-pupil spending nationwide, despite a constitutional measure that mandates more classroom dollars. Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle are working to change the funding level, but have yet to succeed.

Massachusetts, which boasts some of the best schools in the nation, faces a persistent gap between the performance of students in wealthy areas, versus those from low-income neighborhoods, and between white students and minorities. This issue is causing the state to reconsider how money is being spent, and has sparked a heated debate between charter school advocates and teachers unions.

The Arkansas capitol of Little Rock faces an even more dire issue: the exodus of middleclass students from local schools. Baker Kurrus, the state-appointed superintendent of Little Rock, has responded to the flight by explaining that, “the Little Rock School District will not survive if all the kids it serves are children of great need.”
Opioid Abuse Takes Hold

Opioid addiction is one of the rising trends in this year’s report, with seven states – several on the eastern seaboard – placing the problem front and center. Opioids are prescription drugs derived from poppy plants given to patients to relieve pain, but are also highly sought after for recreational use, and are extremely addictive.

Gov. Tom Wolf of Pennsylvania has labeled the illegal use of these drugs as a “crisis” in his state, and has made prevention a top priority. Wolf is also endeavoring to save lives, making naloxone – a medication that reverses the effects of overdose – available over the counter without a prescription.

Wolf is not alone. Maryland, Indiana, Ohio, West Virginia and Massachusetts and Maine are attempting everything from public awareness campaigns to an emphasis on law enforcement to combat the issue.

In West Virginia, the problem has become so pronounced it prompted a visit by President Barack Obama last fall. Despite the attention, the state is still facing high death rates, stiff hospital costs, lost productivity and increased crime.

Drug users are increasingly moving to opioids, in part because states have cracked down on methamphetamine use, adding strict laws to their books. Indiana is one such state.

Overall, more than 52 reporters from an equal number of publications participated in the 50 state Project. They represent newspapers, television, radio, universities, watchdog groups, and news services. Many have won top journalism awards.

Give their work a look ...
CQ Roll Call asked reporters in all 50 states, Washington, D.C. and Puerto Rico to rank the top five issues in their locales. The result is a snapshot of what governors and state lawmakers are working on across the nation right now. Here are some of the numbers.

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Budget/Taxes led the list and was named the single largest issue in 13 states. Energy/Environment came in second with five nods, while states named the Economy, Education and Healthcare as the top issue in four states apiece.
Budget/Taxes was the issue mentioned most often by the assembled journalists. Below are all of the issues mentioned more than once.

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1. ETHICS: **Alabama Speaker corruption slows legislation**

Mike Hubbard, Alabama’s Republican Speaker of the House, was charged by the state with 23 felony counts of public corruption. Hubbard remains in office while awaiting trial in late spring 2016. Division within the House as well as the Senate and Executive Branch has slowed the legislative process, even calling several bills into question. Gov. Robert Bentley is in the middle of a media firestorm that threatens his office, after he ordered law enforcement to lie to the Alabama Attorney General’s Office relating to the Hubbard case. As a result of firing the state’s top cop over the matter, revelations of an alleged affair with his senior advisor have been rampant.

2. BUDGET/TAXES: **Continued shortfall expected**

In Alabama, a balanced budget is a constitutional mandate. Yet the state continues to have an estimated $250 million shortfall for the third year in a row. The 2016 budget calls for more cuts and borrowing from the Education Trust Fund. Even with a Republican-controlled government, there is a lack of consensus on how to best address long-term solutions.

3. HEALTHCARE: **Medicaid to be underfunded**

Alabama is one of several Republican-controlled states that has not expanded Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act. The current budget constraints have led to level funding of Medicaid. Alabama is one of three states to be approved by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to receive a waiver to implement a plan for Regional Care Organizations (RCO) that would transform the way Alabama offers Medicaid. By level funding Medicaid, the state will be unable to implement RCOs.

4. PRISONS/CORRECTIONS: **Prison reform passes, and receives some funding**

Alabama’s prison population is nearing 200 percent of capacity, and many lawsuits have been filed against the state over prison conditions. The legislature passed a prison reform package during the 2015 session without funding. During the 2016 session the legislature approved more funding to implement the 2015 reforms.

5. EDUCATION: **More testing for teachers**

The Republican supermajority in the legislature has passed charter-school legislation, as well as private-school scholarship programs. Now it wants more stringent teacher evaluation and a longer track to tenure. But classrooms are overcrowded, and textbooks are in short supply throughout the state.

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1. **BUDGET/TAXES:** Budget loss spurring legislators to action

Alaska’s budget is projected to close with a deficit of $3.8 billion, or with revenue covering less than 30 percent of state spending. The state has ample reserves that could last another three years, but lawmakers are under pressure to bring revenue more in line with state spending. Currently, the legislature is considering a proposal from Gov. Bill Walker, an independent, to restructure the $50 billion Alaska Permanent Fund – which has historically been used to pay residents’ annual dividend checks – to provide investment revenue to cover some government spending. Walker has also proposed tax increases and a personal income tax, but the Republican-led majorities in the House and Senate have given those proposals a cool reception.

2. **ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT:** Low gas prices stall pipeline

The state has been working with three major oil companies to develop a proposed $55 billion, 800-mile natural gas pipeline that would run from Alaska’s North Slope to the Kenai Peninsula. The project is seen as a potential salvation for the state’s troubled finances. But the oil companies that would own about three-fourths of the project are balking because of pressure from low prices. Lawmakers are expected to consider later in the legislative session whether the state should pursue the project alone, with the help of financing from Asian buyers, or to put the project on hold to wait for prices to recover.

3. **PRISONS/CORRECTIONS:** Lawmakers aim to curb prison population

There’s a bipartisan effort to pass legislation to reduce Alaska’s prison population, inspired by the national Right on Crime initiative with support from the Pew Charitable Trusts, which is paying its Juneau lobbyist $120,000 this year. Proposed reforms – pushed in the legislature by a Democratic and Republican senator and backed by Gov. Bill Walker – are projected to save the state as much as $420 million over the next 10 years.

4. **HEALTHCARE:** Medicaid expansion and reform

The legislature last session stopped Gov. Bill Walker from expanding Medicaid. He then announced over the summer that he would bypass lawmakers by using his executive power to accept federal money for expansion. The legislature sued, but the case was dismissed in early March by a lower court judge. Lawmakers are currently debating whether to take the case to the Alaska Supreme Court. But in the meantime, they’ve been working on legislation to reform Alaska’s $600 million Medicaid program, with proposals aimed at shifting the state’s fee-for-service model to one that pays for quality and results.

5. **HEALTHCARE:** Planned Parenthood

The state Senate last month passed a bill barring “abortion services providers” from contracting with Alaska schools for any purpose, and requiring parental permission before children can take sex-education classes. A separate bill sponsored by the same Republican senator would bar anyone affiliated with an “abortion services provider” from teaching at public schools about any topic – not just abortion or sex education. Planned Parenthood, which teaches sex-education to more than 2,000 students around the state, says the bills target them. It’s not clear yet how the House will approach the legislation, or whether the bills would survive a constitutional challenge.

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Nathaniel Herz covers government and politics for Alaska Dispatch News, working out of Juneau during the legislative session, and Anchorage for the rest of the year.
1. EDUCATION: What comes after the first $3.5 billion?
Education spending has taken the place of immigration as the No. 1 issue for Arizonans. The state’s last-in-the-nation ranking on per-pupil spending brought protesters to the state Capitol during the 2015 legislative session. Now more money - $3.5 billion over the next 10 years - is likely on the way. But many in the education community are calling that just a good start. Here’s why: The money stems from Republican Gov. Doug Ducey and the Republican legislature’s settlement late last year of a lawsuit they lost, for illegally underfunding Arizona schools for several years. In the view of many educators, the settlement cash isn’t new money - it’s money schools were already owed. Arizonans are expected to approve the settlement at the ballot box May 17. A vote is required because the settlement changes the state constitution.

2. IMMIGRATION: The looming issue
Even though illegal immigration has dropped from the top spot among Arizonans’ concerns, recent history tells us it can vault to No. 1 in a matter of 24 hours. There was a flare-up last fall with concerns over Syrian refugees. The next hot spot: The U.S. Supreme Court decision by the end of June on President Obama’s executive action that shielded millions of illegal immigrants from deportation. Whichever way the decision goes, illegal immigration will immediately become a red-hot political issue in the 2016 federal and state campaigns.

3. ECONOMY/CIVIL RIGHTS: State vs. cities
This might be a unique Arizona issue. In his State of the State speech in January, Republican Doug Ducey dared Arizona cities to adopt ordinances that he didn’t like. Do it, he said, and he would do everything in his power to withhold shared revenue the cities get from the state. The threat was directed at Democrat-controlled cities like Phoenix, Tucson and Flagstaff that have considered raising the minimum wage beyond the state level. Some also interpreted Ducey’s threat as applying to civil rights ordinances for LGBT residents. The current legislative session has already seen the introduction of a bill that follows through on Ducey’s threat.

4. ELECTIONS: Republicans cement rule
Arizona is now in the eighth year of Republican control of the Capitol. This year has seen the unfurling of several new efforts to cement that rule by overhauling the machinery of elections: new laws on ‘dark money’ donors, campaign donations, ballot gathering, and redistricting are all in the works. A U.S. Supreme Court ruling in the next few months could also upend the state’s system for legislative redistricting.

5. BUDGET/TAXES: How low will taxes go?
Gov. Doug Ducey has pledged to reduce taxes every year he’s in office, with the goal of getting Arizona taxes as close to zero as possible. So far, he’s one for one. He reaffirmed that vow this year, but as of mid-March he had not yet released a tax-cut plan for his sophomore year. There are some concerns that Ducey’s tax-cutting might transform Arizona into Kansas. The state has reduced business and income taxes nonstop for the last quarter-century, costing the general fund $4 billion in revenue.

EXTRA

MARIJUANA: High desert
At least one and perhaps two ballot initiatives that would legalize recreational marijuana are expected to go before Arizona voters in November. The state legalized medical marijuana by the slimmest of margins in 2010. Since then, some legislators and law enforcement officials have fought a rearguard campaign to hamper the industry. Groups behind the recreational marijuana initiatives, which include backers of successful initiatives in other states, have until the end of May to gather the requisite signatures to get on the ballot. Assuming at least one succeeds, it will have to overcome a formidable array of Republican prosecutors, legislators and the governor to win at the polls in November. To date, polling shows support for recreational marijuana barely breaking 50 percent.
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After 15 years in newspapers, Brahm Resnik covers politics and government for 12 news, and is moderator of “12 News Sunday Square Off,” a leading political talkshow. Resnik moderated the first gubernatorial debate of 2014; covered the SB 1070 arguments before the U.S. Supreme Court. He also covered Sen. John McCain’s presidential campaign. He now covers every issue of consequence in Arizona, from education and immigration - and even hockey.

Can you guess the number of bills passed in statehouses versus on Capitol Hill this year so far*?

The States: **19,313**
Congress: **150**

*January 1 to April 25

Staggering, isn’t it?

Do You Know How We Know?
We keep track of it in StateTrack, so we never miss a bill.
1. HEALTHCARE/BUDGET: Opposition to medicaid expansion showdown
Arkansas made more progress than any other state in reducing the share of uninsured by modifying healthcare reform. Now more than 8 percent of the state population gets their health insurance through the plan while the state budget leans heavily on “Medicaid expansion” money – to the very great chagrin of those who see all this as unsustainable folly. This issue led to a showdown in the GOP primary. Opponents of the new health spending tried to unseat members of the legislature who voted for it. The “revolt” drew the direct involvement of Gov. Asa Hutchinson in GOP primary races. The revolt flopped, removing a total of one incumbent after an as-yet uncounted amount of money was spent. A record turnout in an early presidential primary reinforced the result.

2. TRANSPORTATION: Highways make some progress
Congress passed a highway bill, bringing some much-needed relief to Arkansas along with every other state. The challenge was to come up with Arkansas’ share of the program of about $750 million over 10 years without breaking the governor’s demand no taxes be raised. The governor’s proposed solution largely depends on diverting some general revenue to roads – common in other states but a major departure for Arkansas. In addition, a large share of the so-called “General Improvement Fund” will go to highways. This pot of unspent agency money and interest earned each fiscal year is the state’s most famous source of largesse for local projects. On one hand, the governor came up with a plan that raised no taxes. On the other, he is betting that recession does not reappear.

3. PRISONS/CORRECTIONS: Prison problems remain unresolved
Arkansas has the fastest-growing prison population in the nation. The only reason this problem was not listed first is because other issues require immediate action. The number of state prisoners grew by 30 percent in the 10 years from 2004 to 2014 compared to an almost-flat national average of 0.2 percent. This happened even though the overall crime rate dropped. But moving resources from building more prisons, to efforts to reduce the state’s high recidivism among state prisoners, requires political will the state legislature has not yet mustered.

4. ELECTIONS: Judicial election reform
Arkansas, which elects judges, just had the most expensive cycle of judicial races in its history. Previous spending records were doubled. Much of the expense was for the race for chief justice of the state Supreme Court. The wife of a very successful trial lawyer was one candidate. A judge with the anonymous backing by conservative groups – despite his protests that did not need or want the help of their negative advertising – was another. The whole campaign followed a months-long delay in a Supreme Court ruling on gay marriage that two members of the court declared to be motivated by electoral politics, an extremely rare open protest by sitting justices. Whether any of this leads to substantive reform remains to be seen.

5. EDUCATION: The ongoing school struggle in Little Rock
Other schoolchildren in Arkansas suffer from the legacy of segregation, but nowhere is this problem as visible, and on such a scale, as in Little Rock. The district was taken over by the state for academic deficiencies. State-appointed superintendent Baker Kurrus told local leaders in November that the district’s problems could not be solved if the community did not stop the drain of middle-class children — of all races — from leaving. ‘The Little Rock School District will not survive if all the kids it serves are children of great need,’ Kurrus said. “Don’t think for a minute that we can continue to have students leave our school district who are easier to educate, more affluent and without special needs, and still have the good old Little Rock School District. It won’t be there for you.”

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Doug Thompson is the political and enterprise editor for the Northwest Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, where he has reported on state government issues since 1998. Prior to that, he was a business writer and state desk reporter.
1. ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT: California's unquenchable thirst:
It’s hard to argue that anything is more pressing, for yet another year, than the state’s drought. While there’s been a good
close of rain and snow, the state’s limited water supplies mean another summer of strict conservation and more tough
times for Gov. Jerry Brown and lawmakers on consensus over a long-term solution. While progress has been made on
groundwater regulations and water recycling, a lot more will need to be done for a thirsty state of more than 38 million
people. Brown also faces huge challenges in moving forward on a controversial plan to boost water deliveries from northern
to southern California.

2. BUDGET: Soaring revenues leading to surplus showdown
Following a decade of multi-billion dollar deficits and painful spending cuts, California's tax revenues have been roaring back.
After a temporary tax increase approved by voters and boom times in Silicon Valley, lawmakers are weighing important
choices. Much of the money will likely be automatically diverted to a rainy-day fund, but Democrats in the California
legislature are likely to demand Brown unclench his tight fists and restore spending to social services programs for millions
of low-income residents.

3. TRANSPORTATION: Gas taxes fall short
California has an enormous, costly backlog of needed repairs to roads and highways to say nothing of the pent-up
demand for additional transportation capacity in a state with more vehicles than anywhere in the nation. The problem is
compounded by the fact that the state’s main funding source — gas taxes — are shrinking as California moves towards
more fuel efficient vehicles. The state has a goal of 1 million electric vehicles within a decade, another threat to long-term
transportation funding. Brown floated the idea of a higher tax and even a “vehicle miles traveled” alternative system, but
none of it has found much traction in the statehouse.

4. ECONOMY: Two Californias
The Golden State has some of the most wealthy and impoverished communities in the United States. Income inequality,
say many elected officials, seems to be on the rise. In some rural regions, unemployment has consistently been close to 20
percent. Meanwhile, even relatively prosperous communities (the San Francisco Bay Area, for example) have almost no
affordable housing for middle-class families. Plus, the state's Medicaid program, Medi-Cal, now provides coverage for an
astounding one of every three Californians. Expect a lot more policy and political talk about this issue in 2016 and beyond.

5. ELECTIONS: California aiming to spur voter turnout
California set all-time records for low voter turnout in 2014, and there’s a concerted effort underway to figure out why. Over
the past few years, there’s been a widening gap between California's electorate and its citizenry — that is, the electorate
is older and whiter than the Golden State itself. Local and state officials are searching for the right way to engage more
Californians to cast ballots. And it’s especially important in a state like this one, home to the most robust direct democracy
system in the nation, where dozens of laws are crafted by ballot initiative instead of legislators.

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John Myers joined the Los Angeles Times as Sacramento bureau chief in 2015 after more than two
decades in broadcast news, much of that as an award-winning reporter covering statehouse policy
and politics. His unique online projects included everything from one of Sacramento’s original politics
blogs, to California’s first politics podcast.
1. TRANSPORTATION: Money for roads and bridges tops priority list
Both political parties in Colorado agree the top priority is transportation and infrastructure spending. The state’s huge population growth and increasing traffic congestion is driving the conversation. The transportation department says it needs $1 billion more a year to build and maintain roads and infrastructure. The question is how to pay for the roads. Democrats want to tweak the state’s budget to make more room, while Republicans are pushing a $3.5 billion bond measure. Outside organizations are considering a ballot push to raise sales taxes to better fund roads.

2. BUDGET/TAXES: Colorado’s unique Taxpayer’s Bill of Rights gets critical look
What makes Colorado’s fiscal gears and levers so unique is the Taxpayer’s Bill of Rights, or TABOR. The constitutional measure imposes inflation plus population caps on revenue collection, among other taxing requirements, that limits government growth. It is the third-rail in the state’s politics and the subject of numerous ongoing lawsuits. But the mood on the measure, approved by voters in 1992, is changing. Prominent members of both parties are pushing a ballot measure to remove the spending cap, but keep other parts, such as voter approval of tax hikes. What happens with the ballot measure will hold huge implications on how the state spends money in the future.

3. ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT: The shaky ground in the energy industry
The decline in oil prices is starting to hit Colorado hard, with major job cuts being announced, slowing production and reduced tax revenues for state coffers. The energy industry’s slowdown is moderating the state’s robust economic recovery after the recession, and it contributed to a budget shortfall in the 2015-2016 fiscal year. At the same time, the practice of extracting natural gas through hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, remains a potent issue, despite attempts to mediate the conflicts between energy companies and local communities. The governor’s task force on the issue in 2015 proposed a number of solutions, but failed to reach a consensus on hot-button issues such as local moratoriums and setback rules. Now fracking opponents are likely to push the issue again on the 2016 ballot.

4. EDUCATION: Struggles to determine education funding
Colorado is still struggling to determine the appropriate level of education spending, despite a voter-approved constitutional measure mandating more classroom dollars. The state ranks in the bottom quartile in per pupil spending nationwide, and lawmakers are trying to close the gap. Meanwhile, partisan control of local school boards is a major issue in communities along the Front Range. A conservative board in Douglas County is also taking another look at a school voucher program after an initial effort was blocked by the courts and remains on appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court.

5. HEALTHCARE: Never-ending spending on healthcare:
The state’s expansion of Medicaid and continued increase in spending on the insurance program for the poor remains a major political fight, particularly among Republicans who control the state Senate. The GOP leaders are looking for ways to curtail or slow spending growth, possibly by cuts to the program. But a measure on the 2016 ballot would entirely upend the state’s program. A possible 2016 ballot measure would levy a 10 percent payroll tax – with two-thirds from employers and one-third from employees – to finance a single-payer healthcare system. Prominent leaders from both parties are uniting against the effort, which is being pushed by progressive Democrats and activists.

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John Frank is an award-winning political reporter at The Denver Post with more than a decade of experience covering politics in North Carolina, Florida, South Carolina and Washington, D.C. He is a UNC-Chapel Hill graduate.
1. **BUDGET/TAXES:** Governor targets $500 million in cuts
In a departure from previous budgets that raised taxes on the rich and corporations, Gov. Dannel P. Malloy has ushered in a new and painful era of austerity with his plan to cut $500 million in state spending. The Democrat’s $19.87 billion budget proposal relies on cuts to the state’s social safety net and workforce reductions, which Malloy says are unavoidable in the lethargic economic recovery. Beset by a downturn on Wall Street, and diminished investment tax revenues, the state is facing billion-dollar deficits. Malloy is swearing off another tax hike.

2. **LABOR:** Showdown with public sector unions looms
At least 16 public employee union contracts are up for renegotiation by Malloy in 2016, which constitutes the majority of the state’s 45,700 workers. The governor is looking to shed well over 1,000 jobs through attrition and layoffs, to balance the budget. But his downsizing plan has put him at odds with labor, which was instrumental in Malloy’s 2014 re-election. He is also under pressure from fiscal hawks to extract pension and healthcare concessions from state employees.

3. **ECONOMY:** Avoiding the General Electric domino effect
The narrative that Connecticut is open for business suffered a major blow in January, when General Electric announced that it would be relocating its global headquarters from Fairfield to Boston. The conglomerate’s estrangement from its home state of 40 years was marked by GE’s public criticism of Connecticut’s business climate, and a parade of pitch-making governors from other states. Connecticut’s Gov. Daniel P. Malloy, says GE is not the same company it once was and it was wooed by Boston’s tech hub, millennial workforce and incentives.

4. **PRISONS:** State weighs raising the age of juvenile offenders
Malloy wants to raise the age of juvenile offenders from 17 to 20 for non-violent crimes as well as eliminate cash bail requirements for low-level defendants. He says the current criminal justice system can ruin job prospects and housing opportunities for non-violent offenders, who he adds are often forced to accept ill-advised plea deals because they cannot afford bail. It’s the second consecutive year that Malloy has championed “second chance society” legislation, with the legislature reducing penalties in 2015 for personal drug possession.

5. **ECONOMY:** Governor wants to end package store price controls
The state’s 1,150 package stores are in a standoff with Malloy over his proposal to abolish the “minimum bottle” system, which establishes a pricing floor for liquor sales in Connecticut. Thwarted in his previous attempts to eliminate price controls, the governor says that the consumer-unfriendly minimums set by package stores make Connecticut uncompetitive with neighboring states. The package stores say that half of their mom-and-pop businesses are in danger of closing if the law is changed.

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Neil Vigdor is the statewide political writer for Hearst Connecticut Media, which publishes the Connecticut Post, The Advocate (Stamford), The News-Times (Danbury), Greenwich Time and five weekly newspapers in Fairfield County. A frequent guest on the political talk show circuit in the state, he is a 43-time honoree of the Society of Professional Journalists Connecticut chapter, and was named to The Fix’s 2015 list of the best statewide political reporters.

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Ken Dixon is the capitol bureau chief for Hearst Connecticut Media. Covering the state Capitol since 1994, he has been honored by the National Society of Newspaper Columnists, the National Press Club, the National Society of Professional Journalists, and the Connecticut chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists. Dixon, who also writes a weekly column, was also named to The Fix’s 2015 list of the best statewide political reporters.
1. CRIME: Wilmington grapples with gun violence
Delaware’s largest city has faced a surge in gun violence, with record numbers of shootings and deaths in the past few years. The city's mayor and police department have faced mounting criticism from residents, city council members, and even some state leaders. The city was the subject of a unique CDC study of gun violence, was labeled “Murdertown, USA” by Newsweek, and could soon be the setting for a TV show, Murdertown.

2. ECONOMY: DuPont’s decline starts soul-searching
The DuPont Co. has been a crucial employer and point of pride for Delaware for more than a century, with DuPont names over public buildings and major nonprofits all over the state. But downsizing and proxy battles within DuPont have shocked Delaware, both economically and culturally. Delaware was able to keep two of the three companies that will be spun off in a merger with Dow Chemical, but the company’s decline has caused Delaware to worry about the future of its economy.

3. EDUCATION: Delaware battles over education reform
Debates over testing and so-called “education reform” have roiled Delaware in recent years. State education leaders are facing growing distrust and even anger from local educators and school boards. A push to redistrict schools in Wilmington, which has long suffered from a messy legacy of desegregation, has proven highly controversial.

4. RACE RELATIONS: Race issues ignite passions
Tensions are high in Delaware over race relations. A coalition of African-American pastors has alleged widespread racism in state government, while a long-time state labor secretary left after his department was criticized. Meanwhile, a Dover police officer was acquitted despite a video showing him brutally kicking a man he was arresting in the head. In another incident, police shot and killed a black man in a wheelchair in Wilmington. Both incidents caused protests and ignited widespread anger.

5. BUDGET/TAXES: State government grapples with budget
While it isn’t in a budget crisis, like some states, the Delaware government is not flush with cash. Big chunks of the state’s budget come from volatile sources like unclaimed property and corporate franchise tax. Meanwhile, employee healthcare costs are surging, leading the governor to call for employees to pay more for their healthcare. State leaders have debated systemic changes that would tie revenue more closely to economic growth, but have so far failed.

Matthew Albright covers Delaware state government and politics for The News Journal. Before that, he covered education, both at the K-12 and college level.
1. TRANSPORTATION: Metro issues raise serious concerns
The Washington metro is facing criticism following a series of events over the past several years. In March an event left commuters scrambling after authorities announced a full-day closure to take place in the middle of the work-week on short notice. Area lawmakers questioned the system publically and commuters were left wondering about the systems safety. Metro found 27 problems with power cables or connections during the shutdown. The cables were noticeably frayed but according to Metro, many were fixed before riders commuted the next morning. Last year, a smoke incident occurred on metro that has been tied to the necessity of having to check jumper cables.

2. HOMELESSNESS: Cleanup solution not well received
The D.C. homeless rate has continued to grow, which has been attributed to the fact that just 62 percent of students complete high school in four years. In March, the city cleared a homeless encampment blocks away from the Capitol, which included tents and bags full of belongings. A city garbage truck came to the encampment under the H Street overpass and the tent community was gone later that day. City officials have provided transportation to local homeless shelters, and claim to have notified the area of the cleanup.

3. CRIME: Murder rate increase attributed to synthetic drugs
The D.C. murder rate increased 54 percent last year to 162 homicides, double that of Nashville and Oklahoma City. Many of these murders are attributed to synthetic drugs. Authorities have indicated 911 calls detailing bizarre behavior helped establish a link.

4. STATEHOOD: Fight for statehood continues but no clear end in sight
In President Barack Obama’s last year in office, the D.C. effort towards statehood could be at a standstill. Obama is the second sitting President to endorse statehood for the district, after President Bill Clinton, but the senate hasn’t considered a bill on statehood since 2014. Support for statehood is at a record high according to a November 2015, Washington Post poll, which found that nearly 3 in 4 D.C. residents are upset that they do not have voting representation in Congress. The same study found that 67 percent of residents want D.C. to become a state.

5. DRUGS: Street drugs a constant concern
Synthetic drug overdoses are becoming an issue in the district and the trend has caught the eye of public officials. Mayor Muriel Browser has even gone as far as blaming drug use for spawning crime. Synthetic drugs include K-2, bath salts, LSD, heroin, cocaine, methamphetamines and opium.

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Alex Gangitano is the Heard on the Hill reporter for Roll Call. She was previously part of the CQNow team and was a staff writer for CQ and CQ Weekly. Alex’s other journalism experience includes internships at the New Yorker and National Journal. A native of the D.C. area, she graduated from Villanova University in 2014, with degrees in political science and English.
1. ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT: Miami confronts rising tide
No place in the country has as much at risk in the face of climate change as South Florida, where flooding is already cause for concern. The threat of a sea level rise could become devastating to Miami’s economy, but local leaders say the state government hasn’t acted to encourage alternative fuels like solar power, and Gov. Rick Scott last year unofficially banned his employees’ using “climate change” and “global warming” in talking about the issue.

2. PRISONS/CORRECTIONS: Fate of executions in courts’ hands
The U.S. Supreme Court in January threw out Florida’s death penalty sentencing rules as unconstitutional in the case Hurst vs. Florida. In response, state lawmakers set up a new system taking the decision out of a judge’s hand, and putting it to a 10-2 supermajority jury vote. But what remains uncertain is how courts will react – not just to the new rules, which could face legal challenges, but also to the hundreds of inmates sentenced under the old system on one of America’s largest death rows.

3. IMMIGRATION: Migration at issue as Trump gathers steam
Anti-immigrant sentiment in the presidential campaign is taking its toll in Florida, long a destination for immigrants of all stripes, and Cuban exiles in particular. But lawmakers have targeted undocumented immigrants in a series of proposals to ban so-called “sanctuary cities,” ratchet up criminal penalties, and cut welfare benefits to their families. Furthermore, Gov. Rick Scott is among the governors that has called on Congress to block Syrian refugees.

4. HEALTHCARE: Reformers work to overhaul treatment system
State-run mental hospitals in Florida are under close scrutiny after reporting by the Tampa Bay Times and Sarasota Herald-Tribune exposed that budget and staffing cuts led to violence, neglect and too few beds available. But more mentally ill people find their way into the state’s beleaguered prison system than into treatment. That’s caused a massive reform effort that over the next year will require communities to restructure their mental health and substance abuse treatment systems. The goal, long-term, is to divert the mentally ill to early treatment, instead of the state mental hospitals and prisons.

5. JOBS: No incentive money for Scott’s job-growth fund
The constant refrain from Gov. Rick Scott continues to be: Jobs, jobs, jobs. The Republican governor has made the economy the centerpiece of his administration, touting a drop in unemployment, even as critics say he has focused on the wrong kinds of jobs, including many that pay near minimum wage. But this year, Scott’s economic development agency will have to make do with less after the legislature refused to fund a $250 million business incentive program.

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1. ELECTION: Georgia Republicans fight over soul of party
The same anti-establishment furor that’s sweeping the nation is roiling the Republican Party in Georgia, and that fight is having a profound impact on policy. Mainstream incumbents, like Gov. Nathan Deal, are caught between the desires of a base that wants “religious freedom” legislation and looser gun restrictions, and the demands of business leaders and moderate forces that worry buckling to the grassroots will tarnish the state’s reputation.

2. HEALTHCARE: Is there a middle ground on Medicaid expansion?
Gov. Nathan Deal has for years held that an expansion would be too costly in the long run, and state Republicans have eagerly backed him up. But GOP leaders elsewhere have expanded their programs, defended previous expansions, or signaled they were willing to give it a fresh look. Georgia toyed with a Medicaid “experiment” in 2015, seeking more federal funding for struggling rural hospitals. A growing number of Republican legislators are publicly seeking some sort of middle ground that would allow a halfhearted embrace of Medicaid expansion.

3. EDUCATION: More changes for Georgia’s popular scholarship program?
Georgia’s HOPE scholarship program, which covers most of the public college tuition costs for high-achieving students, is possibly the state’s most popular program. It has sent droves of students (including yours truly) to in-state schools, and the rising tide has also improved the state’s higher education system. But the lottery-funded program hasn’t been able to keep up with the demand, forcing lawmakers to cut back on some of the incentives. Casino interests are ready to spend big money on Georgia and promise a wave of new cash for the program. Deal and other GOP leaders are opposed to the idea, but even the staunchest critics say they are receptive to a debate.

4. TRANSPORTATION: Struggling for a solution to Atlanta’s gridlocked traffic
State lawmakers in 2015 narrowly approved roughly $1 billion in fees and taxes for infrastructure improvements that will repair bridges and upgrade roads. And legislators paved the way for the first step of an expansion of Atlanta’s MARTA mass transit system. But they’ve held the line on more ambitious changes. Business interests poured time and treasure into past attempts for more expansive tax hikes to fund transportation improvements, and corporate leaders are quick to note that Atlanta’s gridlock is among the top complaints from businesses seeking to move to the region.

5. EDUCATION: Can Gov. Deal overhaul the education system?
Deal campaigned for re-election on a promise to overhaul state education policy and transform how students learn and what teachers teach. In 2015, a year after his re-election, he pushed through controversial changes that would allow the state to take over persistently failing schools. But more ambitious plans to rewrite the state’s decades-old school funding formula have led to a tidal wave of opposition, forcing him to hold off for a year.

EXTRA

SWING STATE MOMENTUM: Where are the Georgia Democrats?
State Democrats have long held out hope that Georgia will become a purple state by the end of the decade. But the party has struggled more than ever to gain traction, and two rising stars who ran for the governor’s office and an open U.S. Senate seat in 2014 were both defeated by healthy margins. The party’s leadership remains divided and wracked with infighting, but party honchos hope that an influx of newers, and a growing number of minorities puts the state in play.

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1. HOMELESSNESS: Top priority for Hawaiian residents
Hawaii has the highest per capita rate of homelessness in the United States and Gov. David Ige has declared a state of emergency. Respondents of a January Hawaii Poll for the Star-Advertiser ranked homelessness their top issue. The city’s “sit-lie” prohibition in Waikiki appears to have pushed some of the homeless population there, into shelters, or into other areas of the island. Meanwhile state and city leaders continue to address the problem with new shelters, transition housing and hygiene centers. But critics say homelessness continues to be a problem and that the government has not responded quickly enough.

2. HOUSING: Lack of inventory plagues home seekers
Hawaii has been a notoriously expensive place to live, and with the average price of a single-family home rising above $700,000, there appears to be a larger number of multi-generational households across the state. Thus, the call for housing has been elevated. On Oahu, the most populated island, the city estimates 26,000 units are needed to fill the void; and that three-fourths of those will need to be for those making 80 percent of median income or less. The housing crunch is also believed to be contributing to the increased number of homeless.

3. TRANSPORTATION: Gridlock frustrates motorists
HORROR STORIES abound from commuters who need to endure traffic jams as they travel into Honolulu from suburban neighborhoods in central and west Oahu. City officials are banking on Oahu’s upcoming, 20-mile rail line from East Kapolei to Ala Moana to help ease the situation, but the project has provoked a lot of angry residents as its price tag rises and its timetable is pushed further back. The project is now anticipated to cost $6.57 billion, up more than $1 billion from just a year ago, while completion now is expected in 2022.

4. ECONOMY: Debate continues over the future of Kakaako
Long known as a sleepy industrial district between downtown Honolulu and Waikiki, Kakaako has taken center stage in the development game. As construction cranes dot the region, many question whether enough of the highrise units will be within reach of local home buyers, or if most will be luxury investment properties accessible only to high-end, out-of-state buyers.

5. STATEHOOD: Native Hawaiians and the future
Native Hawaiians continue to disagree on the future of the sovereignty movement, or even whether there should be one. A constitutional convention in February was fraught with conflict, disagreement and protests. Some want a “nation within a nation” model, while others seek an international tribunal.

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1. HEALTHCARE: Indigent care
With Medicaid expansion seemingly off the table, lawmakers spent the session batting around the idea of finding a state solution for the 50,000 to 80,000 Idahoans (estimates vary) who make too much to qualify for Medicaid, but not enough to be eligible for subsidies on the state insurance exchange. Lawmakers adjourned without agreeing on a solution, and Gov. C.L. “Butch” Otter has ruled out a special session or executive action to address indigent care before next year. In the meantime, House Speaker Scott Bedke is forming an interim working group to study the issue and craft an Idaho-based plan.

2. ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT: Environmental issues abound
Idaho and the federal government are butting heads on multiple environmental issues, from the Clean Water Act’s Waters of the United States rule on navigable water, to an obscure EPA water quality standard measured by residents’ fish consumption rates. Those issues will likely be settled in court. The issue frustrating most Idahoans, however, is management of federally-owned land. Overgrowth of fuel has contributed to the explosive fire seasons in recent years, and some Idahoans are pushing for the state to take over those lands, or work with the federal government on active land management.

3. EDUCATION: School funding
While lawmakers have expressed a commitment to increase school funding, it took a while to reach consensus on how that money should be spent. Gov. Otter’s K-3 literacy plan received funding after a legislative retooling, and State Superintendent Sherri Ybarra’s proposal to create a rural school center was slimmed down to a pilot project. At adjournment, though, legislators on both sides of the aisle praised the legislature’s 7.4 percent increase in public school funding.

4. BUDGET/TAXES: Tax cuts not on the horizon
At the beginning of this session, Gov. Otter told lawmakers now wasn’t the time for tax cuts – an unusual position for the politician who built his career on slimming down government. Republican House members had different plans, though, and passed a bill that would shave 0.1 percent off the top two brackets of Idaho’s income tax and 0.1 percent off the corporate income tax. The bill would also add $10 to Idaho’s grocery tax credit. The Senate Local Government and Taxation Committee killed the proposal with no discussion, however, and the legislature adjourned without any tax reductions. But House conservatives are already eyeing potential tax cuts for next year, including potentially eliminating a grocery tax...

5. COURTS: Help for public defenders
At one point the state faced a lawsuit from the ACLU over what the organization called unconstitutional indigent defense. Though a judge threw out the lawsuit, lawmakers remain committed to finding a solution for the defenders’ huge workloads, scarce resources, and lack of statewide standards. The first step to fixing this came in the form of a statewide public defense commission to declare standards and a grant system to help counties meet those hurdles. The bill passed the House and Senate with little dissent.

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1. BUDGET: What budget?
An unprecedented standoff between Illinois’ Republican governor and Democratic supermajorities in the legislature has the state beginning its tenth month of fiscal year 2016, without a budget. There’s no indication a compromise is close, even as lawmakers are supposed to begin crafting next year’s budget. Dialogue has barely touched on spending priorities or revenue ideas; rather the stalemate comes from Gov. Bruce Rauner’s refusal to engage in budget-crafting until Democrats agree to a pro-business, union-weakening agenda, and from Democrats’ refusal to go along with those policies, which they say will weaken the middle class.

2. BUDGET: Deficits mount regardless
Even though Illinois has no budget, it’s racking up a deficit that’s expected to reach $4.6 billion for FY16 (and unless something changes, there could be another $5.6 billion shortfall for FY17). An automatic income tax rollback in 2015 means Illinois is taking in less revenue, but – even without a budget – judicial orders, consent decrees, and state laws are forcing Illinois to spend like the tax cut never happened. Those deficits are piled on top of a structural deficit that’s projected to leave the state with a backlog of unpaid bills projected to reach $25.9 billion in the next few years. And that backlog figure doesn’t factor in the obligations of the nation’s worst-funded retirement systems, which are saddling Illinois with more than $100 billion in long-term pension debt. The states options for reducing it are limited, thanks to strong state constitutional protections, recently affirmed by the state Supreme Court.

3. BUDGET: The consequences of inaction
Social services and higher education – the rare sectors of government spending left out of piecemeal budget agreements and court orders – are starving for cash. It’s led to a dismantling of the state’s social service network: health centers have scaled back hours, autistic children have been turned away from programs, and alcohol and drug treatment centers have closed.

Similarly, public universities and community colleges are receiving no public support. Already, several institutions have discontinued programs, implemented furloughs and laid off faculty. At least one school – Chicago State University – has issued layoff notices to its entire 900-person staff, with a warning that CSU may soon close. On top of that, some 130,000 low-income students promised state tuition aid are not getting their grants.

4. LABOR: Unions on the defensive
Rauner has declared an impasse in contract negotiations with a union bargaining on behalf of 36,000 state employees, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Council. Should he prevail, it could lead to Illinois’ first large-scale AFSCME strike. Rauner’s ideas for growing the state’s economy often rely on proposals that would diminish unions’ power – including tying a property tax freeze to limits on collective bargaining at the local level. While Rauner has stopped talking about a proposal to create local right-to-work zones in Illinois, at least one municipality has voted to establish one. Whether that’s legal is now the subject of a lawsuit. Likewise, a trio of state employees who oppose paying “fair share” fees to the union that represents their bargaining unit are suing to have the fees declared unconstitutional.

5. BUDGET/TAXES: Tax hike likely on the horizon
If and when legislators and the Rauner administration reach a budget deal, some version of a tax hike is almost certainly on the way. Even the Republican governor has signaled a willingness to raise taxes, should he get his way on the rest of his agenda. Adding a tax on services (such as haircuts, accounting services or fees for joining a country club) is one possibility; so too is an income tax increase. The Illinois Constitution forbids anything but a flat tax, but some Democrats advocate changing the constitution to allow either a progressive tax or a surcharge on income over a million dollars.

EXTRA

PRISONS/CORRECTIONS:
The budget situation, and the toxic partisan environment it’s given birth to, has left other major issues on the backburner. Still, there’s bipartisan backing of criminal justice legislation, which could help the governor meet a goal of reducing the prison population by 25 percent within the next decade.
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Though she loves traveling, Amanda Vinicky is an Illinois lady to the core – she has journalism and political science degrees from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and graduated with a master’s degree from the University of Illinois Springfield’s Public Affairs Reporting program. She’s covered state politics for a decade, and never ceases to be infuriated/fascinated. She’s also a big fan of mustard and hot sauce.

Did You Know?

States have introduced **131,723** bills and resolutions so far* this year.

**19,313** of those bills were passed by the legislatures during that period.

*January 1 to April 25

Do You Know How We Know?

We keep track of it in StateTrack, so we never miss a bill.
1. TRANSPORTATION: Road and infrastructure funding

Long-term road funding and related infrastructure concerns will be the lead budget issue in the 2017 session. Much of the remainder of 2016 will be devoted to gauging just how receptive the Hoosier populace will be to increasing the gasoline sales tax, adjusting fees for hybrid and electric vehicles, charging for miles driven, and imposing tolling on new routes, lanes, or structures. Beyond this, there will be decisions that must be made about how funding should be allocated between state and local road responsibilities. With governing Republicans divided over the tax question, the elections will play an important role in the decision-making.

2. DRUG ABUSE: From meth addiction to opioids

Indiana, long a leader in methamphetamine production and consumption, is now suffering further discomfiture on the opioid front. As laws, regulations, and practices have sought to crack down on sales of pseudoephedrine products to meth manufacturers, Hoosiers have turned in increasing numbers to the abuse of prescription opioids, some obtained legitimately, and others illegally. When major opioid channels have been interrupted, communities have turned to heroin. The state has been fighting a losing battle to break the cycle that has resulted in addicted babies, broken families, the nation’s largest single isolated AIDS epidemic in years, and major increases in hepatitis C cases, all of which are straining local and state law enforcement, public safety, and human services budgets. Locally funded county-by-county needle exchanges have been a reluctant first step, and changes are coming to how the state views such drug crimes, but more attention and resources will need to be focused on this major public health and safety concern this year.

3. EDUCATION: Funding and teacher salaries

Education issues continue to fester. Beyond the perennial questions of how much funding should be devoted to education (and more recent splits over how that funding should be divided between public and charter schools, as well as tax deductibility for some private tuition expenses) teacher salary and bonus problems have crept into the picture. Some of the bonus trouble is related to student testing glitches, and a big focus in the next year will be shifting the state to a new standardized test from the long-standing problematic ISTEP. Teacher pay flexibility ran into a late-session buzz saw of sorts in 2016, and will have to be smoothed out before the next session.

4. RELIGION: Freedom vs. anti-discrimination laws

The state, its leaders, and rank-and-file lawmakers were all blindsided by the visceral national reaction to the 2015 passage of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, and even the so-called RFRA Fix didn’t make anyone happy. Failure to reach any semblance of compromise between the irresistible force of civil rights protections for the LGBT community, and the immovable object of the backers of religious freedoms, meant that the 2016 session ended without action. That will make for heated political campaigns and a rowdy 2017 session. A key sticking point: understanding of transgender issues and how to appropriately treat individuals under the law.

5. TECHNOLOGY: Coping with societal and technological change

As new technologies and channels emerge, the state, which celebrates its bicentennial this year, is finding it difficult to address 21st Century concerns with laws that date back generations. Law enforcement tools such as mobile phone data collection devices, license plate scanners, and police body cameras are often being vetted under an old set of laws that never contemplated anything like wireless technology or even Internet. While the state has enjoyed era appropriate state-of-the art regulatory framework for casinos and racinos, trying to fit fantasy sports wagering into that same system has proven challenging. With newcomers such as Uber and Airbnb, industries such as the heavily regulated taxi industry and the taxed and capital-intensive hotel industry find themselves engaged in a battle over their ability to compete on a level playing field. Even electric car manufacturer Tesla, finds their direct sales model challenged by the legacy automakers who must sell via dealerships. The anticipated proliferation of driverless vehicles and vehicle “black boxes” mean that laws and insurance policies will have to quickly adjust to the new realities.

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Ed Feigenbaum is an attorney with an MBA who has been publishing Indiana legislative Insight since 1989, as well as overseeing two other bi-weekly newsletters on gaming and education. A former director of legal affairs for the Council of State Governments, he has a long involvement in state policy issues.
1. EDUCATION/ENVIRONMENT: Water quality and school infrastructure funding

Gov. Terry Branstad called on the split-control legislature to bridge an urban-rural divide over water-quality concerns by reallocating a share of the state sales tax earmarked for school infrastructure projects. By extending the current law and dedicating proceeds in excess of the first $10 million for school building to the environment, schools would still be getting $20.7 billion for infrastructure, otherwise funded by property taxes. Additionally, $4.7 billion would be channeled to improving Iowa waterways. The idea was a tough sell.

2. HEALTHCARE: Transition to privatized Medicaid managed care

Branstad’s “go-it-alone” decision to contract with private companies to manage care to 560,000 Iowans – covered by the $5 billion Medicaid program – has been marked by uncertainty, criticism and partisanship. Legislative Democrats, and some Republicans, want beefed-up oversight of the managed care organizations going forward. Branstad says some minor changes may be in order, but not an onerous bureaucracy that could slow the effort to improve a delivery system for consumers, providers and taxpayers.

3. ABORTION: Planned Parenthood funding issues

Under pressure from pro-life conservatives, Branstad says he supports policy language stipulating taxpayer funds go only to women’s healthcare providers that do not include abortion procedures as part of their service options. No taxpayer money currently is spent on abortions in Iowa, and pro-choice legislators support the status quo on compromise policy for medical exceptions and funding of women’s health services. Pro-life legislators want to defund Planned Parenthood and establish criminal penalties for knowingly acquiring, providing, receiving, transferring or using a fetal body part in Iowa with some research exceptions.

4. EDUCATION: State aid for K-12 public schools

Democrats, who control the Iowa Senate, and Republicans in charge of the Iowa House, continue to disagree over the amount of state money that should be used to fund Iowa’s elementary and secondary schools. GOP representatives support a modest increase, along with special money earmarked for education reforms, but also favor lowering taxpayer burdens with targeted reductions in revenue that squeeze the state’s budget. Legislative Democrats say Iowa’s educational standing nationally continues to slip due to state underfunding and they see less need for tax relief at this time. Branstad lands in the middle on both school funding and tax policy.

5. COURTS/LEGAL ISSUES: Improving Iowa’s criminal justice system

Branstad assembled a working group to review Iowa’s criminal justice system to ensure that “race does not play a role.” Lawmakers are considering proposals to improve the jury selection process to ensure racial diversity of jury panels. They are also looking to revamp funding of drug and mental health courts, and keep confidential juvenile records for minor offenses, so young people aren’t “haunted” by a mistake that affects future opportunities. Studies also have been ordered on racial profiling and use of police body cameras with an eye on future legislation.

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Rod Boshart has been the Cedar Rapids Gazette’s Des Moines bureau manager since 1989, after working for eight years with United Press International in Des Moines and the Quad-Cities.
1. **BUDGET: State finances in a tailspin**
   The state’s budget crumbled this spring as revenues and individual income collections fell well below estimates. A 2012 law that essentially eliminates from Kansas income tax most LLC and small corporation “non-wage” income, is finally hitting home after previous years’ budget balance wanes. Best estimate now is that the fiscal year has an ending balance on June 30 with an unconstitutional $50 million deficit. The problem is there’s no tax source that the legislature could tap to produce revenue by then. Look for lots of shuffling and agency budget cuts, including highway funds and delayed payments into the state’s pension system.

2. **BUDGET/TAXES: No quick fix available to improve state revenues**
   The budget problem rolls into tax problems, with no handy quick tax sources available and Republican Gov. Sam Brownback opposing any new taxes on businesses. The legislature is pretty much frozen, with proposals that are not popular in an election year for bringing LLC and small businesses back to paying income taxes. Last session, lawmakers attempted to fill the budget hole by increasing sales taxes to 6.50% from 6.15% on everything – including groceries – a political hot spot for the poor.

3. **EDUCATION: Legislators at odds over school funding**
   Funding of K-12 public schools is in the sights of the Kansas Supreme Court. The court found that the state is inequitably financing schools, and demanded that the inequity be fixed, or it will order schools closed next year. Lawmakers responded with shuffling money, while they wait the court’s decision on whether funding has been equalized, or whether it orders schools closed. That would trigger an election-year special session. And that’s just equity. Whether Kansas meets the constitutional requirement of adequate education – a bigger dollar issue – hasn’t been decided by the court yet.

4. **ELECTIONS: Judges on the hot seat**
   Five of seven Kansas Supreme Court justices stand for yes-or-no votes as to their retention in the election this November. Historically incumbents get 70 or more percent confirmation votes, but in 2014, two justices got just 53 percent after a small-scale campaign against retention was launched over a death penalty decision.

5. **TRANSPORTATION: Highways causing concern**
   Four years of transferring money from the Kansas Department of Transportation road-building programs to the State General Fund has delayed high-profile projects. It has also sapped maintenance of roads and bridges, sending contractors, suppliers, and the citizenry into an uproar.

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Martin Hawver is the editor and publisher of Hawver’s Capitol Report, a non-partisan news service that reports on Kansas government and politics. Hawver is the dean of the Kansas statehouse press corps, having covered the beat for almost four decades. He also writes a weekly column called “At the Rail,” which is syndicated to Kansas Newspapers.
1. PENSIONS: Pension debt saddles budget
Kentucky's public pension systems are saddled with more than $30 billion in unfunded liabilities that will hamstring state funding of public schools and other priority services for years. New Republican Gov. Matt Bevin wants a big move now, and he has proposed boosting state pension contributions by making 9 percent cuts to state universities and most state agencies. Democrats, who retain a small majority in the Kentucky House, are resisting such deep cuts.

2. EDUCATION: Democrats v. Governor on university funding
The Kentucky House is the last remaining legislative chamber in the South still controlled by Democrats. The priority of House Democrats in this crucial election year is to preserve funding to universities. Democrats have also proposed a new scholarship program for students at community and technical colleges. Democrats and Bevin also clash over his plan to begin basing state funding of universities on performance outcomes, starting in 2017.

3. HEALTHCARE: Rollback on Obamacare
New Republican Gov. Matt Bevin has the polar opposite view of the Affordable Care Act as his predecessor, who fully embraced Obamacare. Bevin is dismantling Kentucky's health benefit exchange and seeking a federal waiver aimed at controlling Kentucky's soaring Medicaid costs, which cover hundreds of thousands of additional people because of expansion under Beshear. Meanwhile, Beshear has formed an advocacy group to fight Bevin's healthcare rollback.

4. CIVIL RIGHTS: Freedom of religion
The U.S. Supreme Court's ruling legalizing same sex marriage last year didn't put to rest the conflict in Kentucky between the Christian right and the LGBT community on several pending bills. Lawmakers are considering a "religious freedom" bill that would ban government from acting against anyone who - based on his or her religious beliefs - refuses to sell a product or provide a service to a same sex couple or LGBT person.

5. HEALTHCARE: Abortion battle rages
The new Republican governor and a growing number of Republicans in the General Assembly have emboldened Kentucky's Right to Life movement and bills that would restrict a woman's access to abortion are moving. In January, one of the bills making Kentucky's "informed consent" requirement more stringent on women seeking abortions, became the first anti-abortion bill to pass the Democratic Kentucky House in a decade. Meanwhile, Gov. Bevin's office has filed lawsuits suits against abortion clinics in Louisville and Lexington, alleging licensing violations.

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Tom Loftus has covered Frankfort for The Courier-Journal for 29 years, focusing on the state budget, campaign finance and government accountability. He is a member of the Kentucky Journalism Hall of Fame and was a major contributor to The Courier-Journal's Pulitzer Prize winning coverage of the 1988 Carroll County school bus crash that killed 27 people.
1. BUDGET: State budget creates cycles of uncertainty
Louisiana has faced repeated state budget crises in recent years – falling into a cycle of large deficits because of a state tax structure that doesn’t support spending levels. Declining oil prices have also taken a toll on the state revenue stream, as has a previous administration’s frequent reliance on one-time revenue streams and fund sweeps. Each year, state agencies are faced with the threat of massive cuts if additional revenue isn’t found. State lawmakers held a special legislative session in February and early March to try to stabilize the budget, but even after raising the state sales tax, another $800 million shortfall is projected in the fiscal year that begins July 1, which could lead to drastic cuts to state services Moody’s Investors Service also recently downgraded the state’s credit rating, citing the financial instability, which could make it harder for the state to borrow money.

2. EDUCATION: K-12 rankings among the worst
State funding for higher education has been reduced by more than 40 percent since 2008 – more than any other state, when calculated on a per-student basis. The budget instability has meant drastic tuition hikes for students at campuses across the state. Average tuition is nearly 65 percent higher than it was in 2008. The situation has gotten so bad that for the past two years, university leaders have threatened to shut down campuses after they’ve been faced with potentially devastating cuts to their budgets. The budget outlook for the coming year promises more of the same, due to restrictions on state spending that leave higher education particularly vulnerable to cuts when the state experiences deficits. College and university leaders say that the uncertain future of the state’s dedication to higher education has led to a brain drain of qualified professors, as well as students. The state isn’t on track to meet workforce demands in several high-demand fields, and while high school graduation rates have slowly risen, the state regularly ranks among the worst states for academic achievement by public school students.

3. HEALTHCARE: Access to healthcare remains limited
Louisiana remains ranked among the worst states in several health quality indicators, including obesity, heart disease, sexually transmitted infections, and other ailments. The state’s former “charity” hospital system, which provides healthcare for the poor, was privatized in recent years. The move has improved healthcare outcomes, but the deals with private partners rely heavily on the state budget being stabilized. Ongoing financial instability on the state’s part, recently threatened the collapse of the system, as private entities that run the hospitals considered walking away from the partnerships if their funding was dramatically reduced. Former Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal, repeatedly rejected proposals to expand Medicaid in Louisiana through the federal Affordable Care Act. New Gov. John Bel Edwards has signed an executive order to expand Medicaid in the coming budget year, but some Republican lawmakers remain opposed to the prospect.

4. TRANSPORTATION: Funding level leaves roads and bridges badly in need of repair
Louisiana’s fragile infrastructure is in serious decline thanks to growing traffic demands and cash-strapped road funds. The unstable state budget also means there is little chance that the issue will be addressed soon. The state’s highways and rural roads regularly rank among the worst, and estimates suggest Louisiana drivers spend hundreds of dollars each year in automobile repairs and lost productivity. Funds for road and bridge upgrades remain scarce, as the transportation trust fund has been increasingly used to cover costs other than construction and maintenance.

5. JOBS: Stunted economy and sluggish education levels could impact job outlook
Louisiana’s chief economist recently revealed that based on several indicators, the state has entered its own recession. The state unemployment rate is higher than the national average, and declining oil prices have taken a toll on one of the largest employment sectors in the state. In addition to oil refinery and drilling company layoffs, several factories in other fields have also scaled back their workforces – laying off hundreds more. A recent economic forecast has predicted that low energy prices will continue to stunt the state’s economy over the next two years, but large-scale industrial projects could help drive job gains in the Baton Rouge and Lake Charles areas. Higher education leaders, however, have raised concerns over whether the state will have the workforce to meet needs, based on the graduation rates at universities and community colleges in high-demand fields.

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1. HEALTHCARE: Heroin addiction digs in after crackdown on pills
Maine has long been a state with a high per-capita drug problem, especially when it comes to opiates and prescription painkillers. The state has cracked down in recent years to some degree on the availability of addictive prescription drugs for addicts, but since 2014, the presence of heroin and fentanyl have increased significantly in both cities and Maine’s vast rural areas. Drug overdoses killed 272 Mainers in 2015, which was a 31 percent increase over 2014. Republican Gov. Paul LePage has pushed for reforms, but has been in conflict with Democrats in the new about his push for more law enforcement, and their advocacy for more treatment and recovery services. Both sides scored incremental victories in 2015, with some new funding on both sides of the equation, but law enforcement agencies report that they remain overwhelmed.

2. ECONOMY: Paper-making industry flailing
Maine’s paper industry has been among the state’s top economic drivers for generations, though most of the news about the industry since 2015 has been negative. In that span, paper mills in East Millinocket, Old Town, Bucksport and Madison have closed, and others, including one in Jay, have significantly reduced their workforces. In addition to thousands of jobs that have been lost directly from paper mill closures over the years, are many more in timber harvesting and associated fields. There are many reasons for the decline, including subsidized Canadian mills, rising pulp costs and high energy costs, but society’s increasing use of electronic messaging over traditional mail is also a factor. A shortage of jobs and an adequately trained workforce are also problems in Maine, though the state’s unemployment rate has been decreasing since 2009, and stood at 3.6 percent in February 2016.

3. ELECTIONS: Government gridlocked
Democrats have the majority in the House and Republicans hold it in the Senate. Meanwhile, Gov. Paul LePage has been operating as if he is in an opposing party of his own. In 2015, he signed hundreds of vetoes – turning back nearly every bill for months at a time – with the stated intention of wasting the legislature’s time. The vetoes, which included the state biennial budget that threatened to shut down government, forced the legislature to accomplish two-thirds votes for virtually any bill to go into law. So far in 2016, very few bills have made it into law. Every member of the legislature is up for re-election in November 2016. LePage’s second and final term, because of term limits, ends in 2018.

4. AGING: Population pushing maine toward ‘demographic winter’
Maine has the oldest median age in the country, and is among only seven states where the median age is older than 40. In recent years it has been cited as one of only two states in the country where the population has been on the decrease. Increasing numbers of retirees and rising rates of younger people moving away from Maine are resulting in a shortage of skilled workers across numerous industries from healthcare to manufacturing. In addition, the aging population is putting more and more pressure on social and healthcare services. Stagnant job and industry growth puts downward pressure on tax revenues that support social services, which is why some economic experts are predicting a ‘demographic winter.”

5. ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT: Fishing industry in peril
Mark Kurlansky’s book “COD: A biography of the Fish that Changed the World,” makes the case that revenues from the cod fishery built this part of the country over the course of centuries. But there are very few wild cod left. For much of Maine, particularly along the coast, this is also true of lobster, shrimp and mud-dwelling shellfish, and scientists say global warming and ocean acidification are major threats. Though the lobster industry remains relatively strong, there is significant pressure on shellfish and in recent years, shrimp fisheries have been closed. With the paper making industry already reeling and manufacturing a sliver of what it once was, Maine would be devastated by the loss of another of its core industries.

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1. RACE RELATIONS: Baltimore man’s death inspires policy changes

After the April 2015 death of Freddie Gray, a black man who was fatally injured while in police custody, riots and looting broke out on the streets. Extended trials of the officers involved are just beginning in beleaguered Baltimore. In Annapolis, a cascade of legislation following Gray’s death – and his difficult life – includes issues from police accountability to lead-poisoning settlements.

2. BUDGET/TAXES: Parties clash over spending priorities

Republican Gov. Larry Hogan continues to tighten Maryland’s financial belt during his second session of the General Assembly, where Democrats have long held power. The governor cut many fees in the last year, and continues to push legislators to pare back taxes for retirees, veterans, small companies, manufacturers and other groups, hoping to spur business growth. Democrats remain angry about school-spending levels, and the governor’s transportation priorities, but the socially moderate Hogan, in remission from cancer, is enjoying high popularity in the state.

3. TRANSPORTATION: Funding mass transit versus roads

Hogan got elected without winning Baltimore City or the two large counties bordering Washington, D.C., where public transport is concentrated, and two large light-rail projects were planned. Hogan cancelled Baltimore’s Red Line and pared back spending for the Purple Line, nearer Washington, instead planning to spend $2 billion largely on bridges and highways, including in more rural areas. The Democratic leadership in the State House, unhappy with Hogan’s cuts, is pushing legislation that would usurp the governor’s power to prioritize transportation spending. Meanwhile, Hogan, who ran on a platform of reducing fees and taxes has cut tolls on state highways, tunnels and bridges.

4. ELECTIONS: Senior Senator’s retirement starts cascade of political races

Maryland’s senior U.S. Senator, Barbara Mikulski, the ranking Democrat on the Appropriations Committee, and the longest-serving woman in Congress, is retiring. The battle for her successor has left two open U.S. House seats, and a handful of state and local officials vying to fill those. Maryland has historically been a solidly blue state, but Democrats lost the governor’s mansion in 2014 as Republicans gained ground.

5. ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT: Who pays to clean the air and water?

Responsibility for protecting the Chesapeake Bay by cleaning up chicken litter and mitigating other run-off continues to spur debate, splitting largely along party and urban-rural lines.

In what appears to be a rare consensus, a bill that would set a new goal of cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 40 percent by 2030 from 2006 levels, has support from environmental groups and the Hogan Administration.

EXTRA

DRUGS: State relaxes marijuana laws while trying to stem opioid and heroin crisis

Marijuana has been decriminalized, and Democrats overrode a gubernatorial veto this session, thus making paraphernalia possession a civil offense. Two years after medical marijuana use was legalized, a state panel is reviewing about 800 applications to dispense it, and approval is not expected until the summer.

Opioid and heroin addiction has been deemed an epidemic in Maryland. The governor has allocated additional funds to combat the growing use of these drugs, and the resulting overdose rate.

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1. **DRUGS:** An epidemic of opioid addiction  
In 2004, fewer than 500 people died of unintentional opioid overdoses in Massachusetts. By 2014, the number had increased to more than 1,100 people. Victims of drug overdoses are black, white, and Latino, old and young, from the cities and suburbs. The state legislature and two successive governors have been taking steps to curb the growing problem of addiction to prescription painkillers, which can often lead to heroin use. Among other efforts, the state has added treatment beds, launched public awareness campaigns, implemented new mandates for insurance coverage, and created education requirements for medical and dental students.

2. **TRANSPORTATION:** Maintenance needed  
The harsh winter of 2015 crippled the Boston area public transit system, the MBTA, calling attention to an aging system with a massive backlog of maintenance needs. Audits of the system over the past year have revealed a host of management, labor and financial problems. Meanwhile, a snowy climate means the state’s roads and bridges also need regular upkeep, and money is always in short supply. Attempts to generate new tax revenue for transportation have failed multiple times, either in the legislature or at the ballot box. For now, state officials are working to reform the public transit system, and fare increases are likely.

3. **HEALTHCARE:** The high cost of health  
Massachusetts was the first state to offer near-universal healthcare coverage, implementing an individual mandate in 2006. It has some of the nation’s leading hospitals. But the state has not been able to curb the growth in healthcare costs, which have for years been among the nation’s highest. The continuing high cost of Medicaid alone, is hitting the pocketbooks of state residents and punching a growing hole in the state budget. While Massachusetts has passed laws aimed at curbing costs through increasing transparency, improving technology and moving toward new payment methods, these efforts remain a work in progress.

4. **ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT:** Already high energy prices projected to increase  
Energy prices in Massachusetts are among the highest in the nation – hurting residents and businesses. The problem is only expected to get worse with the retirements of coal-fired and nuclear power plants limiting supply. Massachusetts has been trying to cultivate new sources of clean energy. But potential projects have gotten hung up by political debates over the merits and pitfalls of building solar energy projects, developing offshore wind farms, importing hydroelectric power from Canada and building new natural gas pipelines. Questions include: How much should the state be subsidizing solar energy development? How do you balance the need for low-cost energy with the environmental impacts of fossil fuel energy generation? What is the right location for new energy infrastructure?

5. **EDUCATION:** The achievement gap  
Massachusetts has some of the best schools in the nation. But there remains a persistent gap between the performance of rich students and poor students, and between white students and minorities. A handful of urban schools are consistently underperforming. As a result, Massachusetts is embroiled in debate: Does the state need more charter schools or not? Should more money be invested in the traditional public schools? How does the state help the lowest performing schools? Are there more effective ways to use existing resources? With a limited amount of state money available to spend on education, a heated debate is pitting teachers’ unions against charter school advocates, both of whom want a bigger share of the pie.

**EXTRA**

**MARIJUANA LEGALIZATION:**
Massachusetts has historically been one of the more progressive states on marijuana policy – decriminalizing the possession of small amounts of marijuana in 2008, and legalizing medical marijuana in 2012. The state’s first medical marijuana dispensaries opened in 2015. In 2016, voters will likely have a chance to vote on legalizing recreational marijuana. Although many of the state’s most powerful politicians oppose legalization, there is expected to be a serious debate as voters look to marijuana legalization in Colorado and Washington and consider following suit.
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Did You Know?

States have introduced 11,015 Budget bills and resolutions so far* this year.

1,574 Budget bills and resolutions were signed/enacted by the jurisdictions.

*January 1 to April 25

Do You Know How We Know?

We keep track of it in StateTrack, so we never miss a bill.
1. ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT: The Flint water crisis
Flint, where the water was found tainted with lead, has become shorthand for any community with water issues in the United States. The genesis of the issue was the decision not to apply corrosion control treatment once the city began pulling water on an interim basis from the Flint River.

The state government repeatedly denied lead problems with the river water, until the evidence was overwhelming. A state department director resigned because of the crisis. There have also been repeated calls for Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder to resign. The state is committing hundreds of millions of dollars to fixing the issue, but it may not be enough.

2. EDUCATION: Detroit schools face possible collapse
Detroit may be coming back from recession, economically and socially, but its school system is still a huge operational and financial mess. It was taken over by the state in 1999, then turned back to the local district in 2004, but continued to be in dire financial straits and went back under state control in 2009.

The school district is now broke, and teachers would have gone without pay. The state has now provided $48.7 million to get the district through the rest of the school year. Gov. Snyder has proposed a complete restructuring of the district, but the legislature has yet to act.

3. ECONOMY: State wary about economy
Michigan's unemployment rate is now below five percent, but despite that solid number the economy of the state is still under close scrutiny because of its reliance on manufacturing.

4. ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT: The Great Lakes and their safety
The protection of the Great Lakes is paramount to many, and a major focus is on combating invasive species. Added to those fears this year is concern about the potential for a major oil spill. State officials have said a 62-year old pipeline carrying light oil and natural gas products between Lakes Huron and Michigan will eventually need to be replaced. Studies have shown a pipeline rupture in this area would have catastrophic consequences for the lakes, the surrounding environment and the critical tourism industry in the area. Those concerns have been disputed by the Canadian firm that owns the pipeline, Enbridge, which claims the pipeline is sound.

5. INSURANCE: Michigan's no-fault system
Another effort to eliminate Michigan's system of unlimited medical benefits for catastrophic injuries in auto accidents is expected this year. The program is unpopular with insurers because it's expensive, but popular with the public because it provides robust coverage to those most seriously injured. State voters have already rejected changes several times, but curbing the program remains a top priority of the insurance industry.

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Zach Gorchow is the editor of Gongwer News Service, where he plays a major role in shaping its award-winning coverage. It is his second tour with the service, initially arriving at the publication in 1998 following stints with several local newspapers. In the time before rejoining the service Zach wrote for the Detroit Free Press, where he was part of the Free Press' Pulitzer Prize-winning team that covered Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick's scandals that forced him from office. Gorchow is a graduate of Michigan State University.
1. **BUDGET:** Minnesota’s projected $900-million surplus

State leaders are debating how to divvy up a sizable budget surplus in a year when all 201 members of the Minnesota legislature are up for election. The surplus shrunk from $1.2 billion in December, tempering expectations for Senate and House leaders, as well Gov. Mark Dayton, who has greatly scaled back his top budget priorities, including universal preschool for Minnesota four-year-olds. This year is a non-budget year in Minnesota, meaning that since the current legislature gave approval last year to a $42-billion two-year budget, no action has to be taken this year. Nonetheless, with an election in the fall, legislative leaders hoping to keep their majorities will have an eye on which legislative agenda items will resonate most with Minnesotans. Republicans are pursuing tax cuts for Social Security retirees, veterans and businesses. Senate Democrats are pressing for statewide paid family and sick leave.

2. **TRANSPORTATION:** Comprehensive transportation package

Dayton and legislative leaders have not been able to reach agreement on how to repair the state’s aging road and bridges. Republicans roundly rejected a proposed gas tax cut, saying the state should instead tap into the general fund to pay for transportation upgrades. Senate Democrats and Dayton, however, oppose that plan, saying it would strain the state budget in future economic downturns. They add that it’s an unrealistic funding stream that won’t put a dent in the problem. Business groups and state labor trade groups are also lobbying for a transportation package, but it’s unclear if state leaders will bridge their divides during a shortened legislative session.

3. **ECONOMY:** Racial economic disparities

Since last fall, Dayton has highlighted the vast disparities between black Minnesotans and their white counterparts. A census report showed a rise in poverty of black Minnesotans, a diverse racial group in Minnesota made up of African-Americans, as well as African immigrants from Somalia and Liberia. State Democrats and Republicans have vowed to come up with a menu of solutions to improve economic opportunities for black Minnesotans. Democrats are meeting with residents in those communities to come up with a plan, but Republicans want proposals focused on education disparities.

4. **INFRASTRUCTURE:** Rural broadband expansion

Legislators have several plans to expand broadband high-speed Internet access throughout the state. A recent report by a state task force studying the issue found that two in 10 homes lack high-speed connections and recommended the state spend $200 million. Dayton wants to put $100 million toward the effort, but it is far from certain Republicans would agree to spend that much. The issue could take on particular prominence as lawmakers try to win voters in rural communities hoping for the new technology. The report said that, while the infusion into the state’s broadband grant program would help Minnesota achieve its goal, it would cost $900 million to $3.2 billion to fully expand high-speed Internet statewide.

5. **EDUCATION:** Early education funding

Dayton previously announced he wants to spend more than $300 million for state-paid preschool programs for 4-year-olds. But with a reduced budget surplus he has dramatically scaled back his proposal and is now asking for $25 million for a voluntary pre-kindergarten program that prioritizes schools with high poverty rates and lack of daycare programming. The plan is to have the program in public schools, but some legislators and education experts favor directing money to an existing scholarship program that pays for low-income students to attend current programs. Opponents of a school-based preschool program say state dollars would be better spent on targeting high-need families through scholarships they can use at private or public day care programs.

Ricardo Lopez is a member of the Star Tribune’s Capitol bureau. He writes about education politics, as well as the budget and various agencies. Since joining in July 2014, he has specialized in accountability journalism, shining a light on lobbying and political spending at the Capitol and the murky legislative process that often takes place during the closing hours of the session. He was previously a business reporter covering the California economy at the Los Angeles Times, and has worked for newspapers in Virginia, Delaware and Nevada.
1. BUDGET: State revenue falls short of projection
Mississippi is under a budget crunch. The state’s revenue is $42 million below estimates, and its Division of Medicaid is operating on a $50 million deficit. Gov. Phil Bryant is also searching for $35 million to fix the state’s foster care system, which is subject to a long-running federal lawsuit.

The fiscal budget next year is set at $6.2 billion.

2. FLAGS: Debate looms over confederate image on state flag
Since the Charleston, South Carolina shooting that left nine black church members dead, several Mississippi cities and counties, and some universities, have stopped flying the state flag. The Republican-controlled Legislature is at a loss as what to do, finding that consensus does not exist to redesign or take state money away from public entities that refuse to fly the banner.

3. ETHICS: Political campaign spending under microscope
Mississippi politicians have spent campaign money on cars, clothes, apartments, trips out of state, tax bills, insurance, home improvements and payments to themselves or their own companies.

The Clarion-Ledger recently ran a month-long installment of an ongoing series, “Public Office/Private Gain” outlining how many Mississippi politicians have taken advantage of lax campaign finance laws and reporting regulations to line their own pockets.

4. RACE RELATIONS: International Airport is racial battlefield
African-American officials say legislation that would remove the Jackson Municipal Airport Authority from overseeing the airport is racially based. Republicans disagree, asserting that there is no takeover bid and that the bill would instead create a regional authority with representation from Jackson, Madison and Rankin counties. The legislation’s language would replace the municipal airport authority with a nine-member board.

5. TRANSPORTATION/INFRASTRUCTURE: Infrastructure maintenance
The Mississippi Economic Council, the state’s chamber of commerce, is pushing lawmakers to raise taxes – they haven’t specified which ones – to produce at least $375 million a year for road and bridge maintenance. They warn that the state’s roadways are crumbling, thousands of bridges need repair, and the state lacks money for maintenance. Some lawmakers have balked at any suggestion of raising the gas tax to pay for infrastructure maintenance.

EXTRA

CONTAMINATED WATER: Concern over lead levels
Higher than normal levels of lead have been found in samples of water from some Jackson homes.

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1. RACE RELATIONS: Specter of University of Missouri protests looms
Student protests, which centered on racial unrest and accusations that minority students were being treated unfairly, swept through the campus, which has about 35,000 students and is the state’s flagship public higher-education institution. The school’s football team even weighed in on behalf of the students, and one professor – Melissa Click – attracted national attention because of a video of her trying to block student journalists from interviewing the protesters. Republican legislators, particularly those from rural Missouri, were angered by the unrest and have cut the school’s funding as punishment. Gov. Jay Nixon, a Democrat, is trying to get the cuts reversed, along with some supportive legislators.

2. RACE RELATIONS: State and St. Louis region post-Ferguson
Ferguson, a St. Louis suburb, attracted international attention after a local police shooting in August 2014 that killed 18-year-old Michael Brown, who was African-American and unarmed. His death touched off months of protests, which centered on issues dealing with race, economic inequality, and police conduct. The General Assembly passed a sweeping overhaul of municipal courts in 2015 aimed at curbing the jailing of low-income people convicted of minor traffic offenses. The state just struck down basic elements of that law and the debate continues over what more needs to be done. Meanwhile, some blame crime spikes in St. Louis and Kansas City on the “Ferguson effect.”

3. ETHICS: Lawmakers debate ethics reform, and legislative misconduct
Missouri is the only state in the nation with no limits on the size of campaign donations or on gifts from lobbyists. That long-standing issue has gotten swept into a more recent controversy on legislative misbehavior that forced the Missouri House speaker, and a prominent state senator, to resign in 2015 over inappropriate text messages with college-age interns, and accusations of sexual harassment or misconduct. The General Assembly has been debating proposed changes, but opponents have so far successfully blocked many of them.

4. RELIGION: Groups battle over proposed “Religious Liberty” bills
Missouri Senate Democrats unsuccessfully filibustered for 39 hours to try to block a measure, known as Senate Joint Resolution 39, that seeks to amend the Missouri Constitution and prohibit the state from “penalizing clergy, religious organizations, and certain individuals for their religious beliefs concerning marriage between two people of the same sex.” The state Senate still passed the measure, despite pressure from business groups that say it could hurt business, such as conventions or high-profile sports events, and attract unwanted national attention. A Missouri House committee killed the measure.

5. HEALTHCARE: Rural hospitals close
The GOP-controlled General Assembly has declined to expand Medicaid, despite pressure from Gov. Nixon, the Missouri Chamber of Commerce, and healthcare groups. The lack of action has cost the state $6 billion in federal dollars. Several rural hospitals have closed because they are losing other federal money – phased out under the Affordable Care Act—that was intended to be replaced by the expansion money. The General Assembly’s majority is concerned that Medicaid continues to cost the state too much money. Missouri already has one of the state’s lowest ceilings for participation. Low-income adults can earn no more than 19 percent of the federal poverty level.

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Jo Mannies has been covering Missouri politics and government for four decades, much of that time as a reporter and columnist at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. She was the first woman to cover St. Louis City Hall and spent four years in the Post-Dispatch Washington Bureau, where she won a National Press Club award in 1983. She has covered every president since Jimmy Carter. She left the Post-Dispatch in late 2008 to join others who earlier had taken the newspaper’s buyout to create an online nonprofit news site called the St. Louis Beacon. The site merged in late 2013 with St. Louis Public Radio.
1. ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT: Natural resource downturn
The number one issue in the state is the downturn in the natural resource extraction industry - coal, oil and natural gas - and the economic impact on the Montana economy, jobs, and tax base. Coal companies are declaring bankruptcy, coal production is slowing, and workers are being laid off.

Montana communities that experienced a surge in population and are struggling to accommodate the rapid influx are now feeling the impact. Politicians are blaming the EPA, Washington and Oregon legislatures, environmentalists, and other concerned about climate change for the slowdown.

2. ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT: Electricity drain
Montana exports much of its electricity generated in Colstrip, a series of coal-fired power generating units, out of state. But Montana relies on Colstrip for employment and taxes. One of the state’s largest refineries depends on electricity generated at Colstrip and the refinery manager is concerned how he will get affordable, reliable energy if the federal Clean Power Plan combined with the actions of the Oregon and Washington legislatures to begin moving away from coal-fired generation results in the closure of Colstrip.

3. ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT: Water, or perhaps the lack of it
Montana generally had a dry, warm winter in 2015 and there’s concern the state could be headed into a drought. Agriculture - farming and ranching - is a backbone industry in the state. There’s also concern for another busy wildfire season.

4. ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT: Endangered species
Whether it is the sage grouse or grizzly bears, endangered species are almost always a top issue in Montana. The state skirted a listing of the sage grouse on the endangered species list when the federal government agreed to allow lawmakers pull together stakeholders to protect its habitat. The issue is being litigated. On the flipside, the federal government is moving toward delisting the grizzly bear, though bear advocates say it’s too soon. Regardless, this issue impacts agriculture, natural resource extraction, sportsmen and women, and others who come to states like Montana for its wild spaces and wildlife.

5. HEALTHCARE: Veterans issues
Per capita, Montana has a high number of veterans for a state with just over a million people. It also has a high suicide rate, generally. There’s concern among political leaders on how to provide healthcare, including mental health, to veterans. The state’s large land mass and sparse population make it difficult for veterans to access services. There’s a proposed ballot measure for 2016 that would create a new category of EMT’s to serve the population. If it gathers enough petition signatures it will go on the November ballot.

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1. PRISONS/CORRECTIONS: Death penalty dominates
Last year, Nebraska became the first conservative state in four decades to repeal the death penalty. The officially nonpartisan legislature did so by overriding a veto by Republican Gov. Pete Ricketts. A referendum is now scheduled for November. The issue has loomed over lawmakers this session and over candidates preparing for the upcoming election. The political implications might even be felt in 2018, when Ricketts is expected to seek a second term as governor, but could face a challenge from within his own party.

2. BUDGET/TAXES: Fighting the crest of the property tax wave
With agricultural land values hitting all-time highs in recent years, farmers and ranchers are fighting hard to lessen their property tax bills. Property taxes are levied by local governments – particularly school districts and state lawmakers are under pressure to act, either by forcing local governments to spend less, or by subsidizing them with state sales and income taxes. The situation has made school districts’ perennial tug-of-war over state aid all the more fierce, and it places urban and rural lawmakers at odds.

3. PRISONS/CORRECTIONS: Prison system problems linger
A handful of headline-grabbing incidents at state prisons – beginning with a riot last year in which two inmates were killed and two corrections officers injured – highlighted challenges facing Nebraska’s penal system. The state has been threatened with a lawsuit if prison crowding isn’t addressed soon, and efforts to address the issue have been criticized as not doing enough. The Department of Correctional Services has also struggled to recruit and retain corrections officers, a task that could grow even more challenging following inmate assaults on staff members at two prisons in the same week in early March.

4. MARIJUANA: Legalization battles on two fronts
Mothers whose children suffer from intractable epilepsy have been relentless in their efforts to allow some form of medical marijuana in Nebraska, even pooling together to hire lobbyists for their cause. A state lawmaker significantly scaled back his medical marijuana measure last year after failing to gain traction, but the question remained whether the changes would satisfy enough opponents in the legislature. Meanwhile, Nebraska Attorney General Doug Peterson and his counterpart in Oklahoma continued to pursue their lawsuit challenging Colorado over its marijuana legalization, which they claim has flooded their states with drugs.

5. CIVIL RIGHTS: Balancing religious freedom and LGBT rights
Nebraska’s ban on same-sex marriage is gone, but other questions surrounding the state’s lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender population remain unanswered. One lawmaker is continuing his push for workplace protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Another is fighting to protect state funding for faith-based adoption and foster care agencies that refuse to serve LGBT families. And the entity that governs the state’s high school sports teams has faced criticism from both sides over its new rules governing how transgender students may participate.

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Zach Pluhacek covers state government and statewide issues at the Lincoln Journal Star.
1. ECONOMY: Old Faithful
The Nevada economy continues to rebound from the recession, when unemployment reached 15 percent. It is now close to a third of that, but underemployment and those leaving the workforce remains high. The question facing lawmakers is if it’s sustainable with the globalization of gaming and the slow rebound of the construction industry.

2. ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT: Renewable energy debate
With the specter of 47,000 low-income adults losing their healthcare, Republican legislators are preparing to approve the Medicaid expansion put forward by President Obama. The extension will add an additional two years to the program.

3. EDUCATION: School choice remains controversial
The debate continues over how education is delivered in Nevada, along with questions over school choice and decentralization. Education got a huge infusion of money with accountability in last year’s legislative session. The attempt to deal with various populations, including English language learners in a state with a burgeoning Hispanic cohort, resulted in the largest tax increase in history last year. But the school choice law, the only universal one in the country, has spawned lawsuits and a rancorous partisan divide. A move to deconsolidate the fifth largest district in the country, in Clark County, also continues to move forward.

4. ECONOMY: Nevada’s move toward the future
A state heavily dependent on gaming is now trying to attract new industries, especially futuristic ones. An unmanned aerial vehicles facility and two electric car manufacturers has been the centerpiece of the attempted move to reduce dependence on gaming revenue. The real question is whether this can create new jobs and justify the change in the tax structure passed last year. There are also questions as to whether attempts to rebrand Nevada will attract other high-tech businesses?

5. BUDGET/TAXES: GOP looking to repeal tax increase
The largest tax increase in state history, which established a new tax on business, the first substantive change in the tax structure in three decades, passed last year. It not only looms large over the current campaign cycle, affecting Republican incumbents who voted for it, but an effort is underway to repeal the increase, which would have a dramatic impact on the state’s finances.

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Jon Ralston has been covering politics in Nevada for more than a quarter-century. He currently hosts “Ralston Reports” on all three NBC affiliates in Nevada; KSNV-Channel 3 in Las Vegas, KRVN-Channel 4 in Reno, and KENV-Channel 10 in Elko. He is a contributing editor at Politico Magazine and regularly appears on MSNBC, Fox and PBS. He was previously a reporter for the Las Vegas Review-Journal and the Las Vegas Sun.
1. DRUGS: Heroin and Fentanyl overdoses surge
Deaths due to Drug overdoses have nearly doubled since 2014, as cheap heroin and spiked fentanyl become more common. State lawmakers are scrambling to catch up with the the epidemic, passing criminal laws and adding funds for prevention and treatment.

2. HEALTHCARE: GOP bends to pressure extends Obamacare
With the specter of 47,000 low-income adults losing their healthcare, Republican legislators are preparing to approve the medicaid expansion put forward by President Barack Obama. The extension will add an additional two years to the program.

3. GUNS: NH takes aim at concealed weapon permits
The NH GOP is looking to dispense with gun permits and has indicated that it is poised to put such a rule on Gov. Maggie Hassan’s desk this year. Hassan vetoed a similar measure last year, but Republicans have the votes to override that decision.

NH is one of several states that is considering such a move.

4. HEALTHCARE: Abortion legislation on the horizon
Abortion is set to be a hot topic this election-year, following the recent Planned Parenthood controversy over fetal tissue that swept the nation. The controversy led an Executive Council headed by Republicans to reject using state money to support the five Planned Parenthood clinics in the state. Another wrinkle; legislation to create a new crime for interference with a health center is under consideration. This follows last October vandalism at the Planned Parenthood clinic in Claremont that closed it for two months.

5. GAMBLING: Keno versus a fully-fledged casino
The New Hampshire House of Representatives is moving toward legalizing Keno, a video game-like bingo. The game would be subject to local ordinances and be available in bars and restaurants. The game is unlikely to to generate the income of a casino and the push for such an establishment is ongoing, with several influential groups attempting to endear themselves to legislators. It is unlikely that such a move will be made because neighboring Massachusetts is already in the process of building three large casinos.

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1. PENSIONS: No consensus as pension problem grows
The state’s unfunded pension liability continues to balloon. As of July 2014, New Jersey had $40 billion in pension debt, and soon-to-be-released revised figures are expected to be much larger. Adding salt to the wound, state officials, led by Gov. Chris Christie, declared in 2011 they had fixed the troubled pension system in part by requiring the state and public workers to kick in more money. The state reneged on its part of the deal but workers still contribute at higher rates, angering public workers and leaving them reluctant to make additional sacrifices. Meanwhile, Democratic lawmakers are pushing a ballot measure that, if approved by voters, would force the state to make its annual contribution regardless of how much money it has in its coffers, setting the stage for massive budget cuts or tax hikes down the road if the state falls short of revenue.

2. TRANSPORTATION: The well has nearly run dry
New Jersey’s Transportation Trust Fund is used to fund road projects and repairs across the densely populated state. However, the fund can’t finance road or rail projects beyond June. It was originally envisioned as a dedicated source of cash for transportation projects, but the state has relied heavily on borrowing. The state’s 14.5 cents per gallon gas tax is the second lowest in the nation, and hasn’t been increased since the late 1980s. Many lawmakers in the Democratic-controlled legislature have suggested increasing the tax, coupling it with a tax decrease in another area. But a proposal to raise the tax, an unpopular measure, hasn’t surfaced, and the state’s Republican governor has talked a hard game of vetoing any proposal that didn’t amount to “tax fairness.”

3. BUDGET/TAXES: All silent on the tax front
New Jersey property taxes are among residents’ top concerns. A two percent cap on increases in local budgets may have helped contain the annual increase, but they’re still the highest in the U.S. Statewide, the average property tax bill rose 2.4 percent, or $191, from $8,161 in 2014 to $8,353 in 2015. Despite being among residents’ top concerns, lawmakers and the governor have yet to take on property tax reform since installing that cap.

4. GAMBLING: The tale of Atlantic City
The problems facing Atlantic City and its gaming industry continued to worsen since this time last year, and has culminated in a contentious battle over whether the state should take over the city’s finances. Emblematic of the other top issues facing the state listed here, the price of inaction and kicking the can down the road for another year has resulted in the need for drastic measures. The legislature is battling over a plan that would give the state sweeping authority over Atlantic City’s key functions as the already-battered shore city teeters on the brink of insolvency.

5. ELECTIONS: A lame duck governor with little public support
Christie boasted on the presidential campaign trail of succeeding in political arenas where gridlock seemed inevitable. He was hoping to be on his way to Washington, D.C., but his ability to bring people to the table and hash out deals is still strong. However, his lame duck status, coupled with his record-low approval rating, and some powerful Democrats jockeying for higher office, has left some in the New Jersey Statehouse in a precarious spot.

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1. ECONOMY: The quest for a more diverse economy

Long reliant on federal government spending, and the volatile oil and natural gas industries, New Mexico is trying to build a more diverse economy and recapture its mojo. But the effort has been bumpy, as the state posted the nation’s highest unemployment rate for two consecutive months.

Also, New Mexico has lagged behind its neighbors in population growth, with more than 25,000 people leaving during a recent five-year period.

Gov. Susana Martinez has touted tax cuts, expanded tax breaks and the adoption of a right-to-work law as ways to make the state more economical. But some of those efforts have met resistance in the legislature, as Democrats have blocked the right-to-work proposal and pushed for an increase in the state’s $7.50 per hour minimum wage.

2. CRIME: No farewell to arms, as crime sparks policy debate

The Albuquerque-area has been rocked by a recent spate of violent crime, prompting calls for both tougher penalties for violent repeat offenders and more money for treatment programs.

This year’s 30-day legislative session featured debates on bills to allow cities and counties to enact youth curfews, expand the state’s “three strikes” law, and impose longer sentence on individuals convicted of certain DWI and child abuse offenses. Most of the bills failed, but some were approved and signed into law.

New Mexico’s jails are already nearly full, and some lawmakers voiced concern about what they described as a “pro-incarceration” agenda.

Others linked New Mexico’s crime rates – the state recently had the second highest violent crime rate per capita in the country – to high poverty and shortcomings in the state’s education system.

3. BUDGET: Energy prices lead to budget woes

Plummeting oil and natural gas prices have blasted a hole in New Mexico’s budget, and state spending is poised to decrease next year for the first time in five years.

Spending cuts in the $6.2 billion budget for the fiscal year starting in July, actually could have been even deeper, but lawmakers took $89 million from various accounts as a one-time fix to bolster spending levels. In response to the budget pinch, Martinez’s administration has directed state agencies to take cost-saving steps, including cutting back on non-essential employee travel and outside contracts.

Some Democratic lawmakers have called on Martinez to relax her stance against tax increases, but the governor has indicated she has no plans to do so.

4. HEALTHCARE: Healthcare system feeling strain

Largely as a result of the budget situation, the state is facing a $417 million Medicaid shortfall. In response, state officials are considering cutting reimbursement rates for providers and hospitals and, down the road, possible new mandatory payments for some patients.

Martinez decided in 2013 to accept Medicaid expansion, and the number of New Mexicans enrolled in Medicaid has skyrocketed in recent years – it’s now at about 850,000 people – to more than a third of the state’s population.

Meanwhile, the state’s behavioral health system is still on shaky footing, after the state Human Services Department froze Medicaid funding for 15 nonprofit providers in 2013 due to allegations of overbilling, mismanagement and possible fraud. Attorney General Hector Balderas has cleared 13 of the 15 providers of fraud, but lawsuits on the issue are likely to take years to resolve.
5. EDUCATION: Ongoing disagreement over public school direction

The governor’s push to require mandatory retention for third-graders who cannot read proficiently stalled once again this year in the Democratic-controlled Senate.

However, lawmakers have increased funding in recent years for some of the governor’s initiatives, including programs focused at disadvantaged students in elementary school. Meanwhile, teachers unions have filed lawsuits seeking to halt the state’s controversial teacher evaluation system, which was enacted administratively in 2012. New Mexico has long had one of the nation’s lowest graduation rates, though it’s improved in recent years.

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Did You Know?

In New Mexico the estimated number of upcoming bills and resolutions is 1,734*.  

*As of December 10, 2015

Do You Know How We Know?

We keep track of it in StateTrack, so we never miss a bill.
1. ECONOMY: Minimum wage raise?
The number one issue in New York right now is the minimum wage, and whether or not it gets raised in this year’s state budget. Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo has been criss-crossing the state in an RV with labor leaders promoting his plan for a $15 an hour minimum wage, but any such proposal must get through a Republican controlled state senate, and they are not eager to go along. Cuomo even named the campaign for $15 after his late father, former Gov. Mario Cuomo who was a national champion of liberal politics during his tenure.

2. ETHICS: Statehouse corruption leads to calls for reform
The leaders of both legislative houses were convicted on federal corruption charges last year, and calls for reform have once again grown louder. Some have suggested banning outside income and making the legislature full time, but that would require a change to the state constitution, which currently guarantees a part time legislature.

3. STATE VS. LOCAL GOVERNMENT: Governor and Mayor Square Off
The feud between Andrew Cuomo and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio continues to boil. Because of the way government is structured, New York City is a creature of the state. Thus, any major initiatives the mayor wants need to go through Albany for passage. And this governor is less than eager to help the mayor fulfill his campaign promises and political wish list.

4. JOBS: Paid family leave
Cuomo has proposed a program that would grant 12 weeks of paid family leave – the most generous in the nation. Senate Republicans are resisting the move.

5. BUDGET/TAXES: GOP calls for tax shave
The Republicans want more tax cuts, but this year they have also proposed raising the income tax exemption for private pension holders. Retired New Yorkers are leaving the state in droves for places like Florida, which has no such tax. The idea is to keep them here.

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1. JOBS: **Lower paying jobs available**
Like many other states around the country, the unemployment rate in North Carolina has fallen in recent years. But many people and communities are still feeling the effects of the departure of textile and furniture companies. In many places those represented well-paying jobs. Now they’re being replaced with service industry options that pay less.

2. EDUCATION: **Funding lags behind growth**
There are a lot of dimensions to this. Teachers have recently gotten raises but still work for less than the national average. There’s a partisan debate as to whether the Republicans who control state government have cut education funding. But funding hasn’t kept pace with growth, as North Carolina has become the nation’s ninth largest state. And in cities such as Charlotte, there’s a problem of what to do about the re-segregation of schools. That pits city residents against suburban parents.

3. ECONOMY: **Urban-rural divide**
While North Carolina is becoming increasingly urban, the legislature is still controlled by rural interests who tend to be Republican. This flared last year when rural lawmakers tried to redistribute sales tax revenue from more populated to less populated areas. Rural counties, which still dominate the state’s geography, have seen their tax bases shrink and the population depart for cities. Compounding the problem is the fact that most urban lawmakers are Democrats.

4. TRANSPORTATION: **Public-private partnerships draw fire from electorate**
The state has begun trying to pay for roads through public-private partnerships. Last year it contracted with the subsidiary of a Spanish firm to install toll lanes on Interstate 777 north of Charlotte. That’s proven incredibly controversial. Some local officials who initially supported the project were run out of office last year and some Republican voters in the area voted against GOP Gov. Pat McCrory in this year’s primary because of it. More toll roads are on the table.

5. CIVIL RIGHTS: **Social issues**
North Carolina’s General Assembly passed controversial legislation that voids a Charlotte LGBT ordinance, and curtails local governments from passing virtually any ordinances at odds with state law. Lawmakers were reacting to a city ordinance that not only protected LGBT people from discrimination, but would have given transgendered people the right to use the bathroom of the gender with which they identify. Republicans cast the new law as necessary to protect women and children. Critics said it pushed the state backwards. It’s not the first social issue to dominate headlines. Two years after voters passed a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage, courts – including the Supreme Court – made it legal. There has been reaction to that, particularly in legislative action, to allow magistrates to recuse themselves on religious grounds from performing such marriages. There’s also been new legislation on abortion.

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Jim Morrill has covered politics at the Charlotte Observer since the mid-1980s.
1. **BUDGET:** North Dakota’s $1 billion shortfall

North Dakota was forced to plug a more than $1 billion budget gap in February, a reversal from several years of increased spending and record budgets. Republican Gov. Jack Dalrymple ordered cuts of 4.05 percent to all state agencies that receive general fund dollars. The cuts totaled about $245 million, the largest such cut ordered by a North Dakota governor. The rest of the budget gap will be filled by state rainy day fund dollars, and carry over cash from the state general fund’s ending balance. Nearly 70 percent of the shortfall comes from declining sales tax collections, a large portion of which is tied to energy production in the western part of the state. Lawmakers are expecting a fairly flat state budget in 2017.

2. **ECONOMY:** Oil prices and production

A more than one-year decline in oil prices has resulted in a slowdown in oil activity in North Dakota but not a significant decline in production. The state’s recently revised budget revenue forecast has the state maintaining one million barrels of oil per day for fiscal year 2016, before dropping below that mark early next year and averaging 900,000 barrels per day for fiscal year 2017. Over the past year operators have gone through multiple rounds of layoffs, cut costs, and improved efficiencies. In February, the state’s active drilling rig fell below 40 barrels for the first time since mid-2009.

3. **ELECTIONS:** Open governor’s race

North Dakota has its first open governor’s race in 16 years, which has resulted in a contested race for the GOP nomination. Dalrymple announced in August 2015 he wouldn’t be seeking another term. The primary is on June 14.

4. **ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT:** Clean power plan impact

Federal EPA emissions rules could have major impacts on North Dakota and officials are waiting to see how court challenges play out before continuing work on a compliance plan. A U.S. Supreme Court decision to halt implementation of the rules to allow the court process to be concluded gave the state a reprieve from what officials say are unfair and harsh requirements for the state. Requirements in the original rule called for North Dakota to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 11 percent from 2012 levels by 2030; the final rule moved that target to 45 percent, which could result in the closure of multiple North Dakota coal-fired plants.

5. **ELECTIONS:** Ballot measures

North Dakota voters have a single referred ballot measure on the June 14 ballot, and so far have three other measures that may end up on the Nov. 8 ballot. In June, state citizens will be voting on changes made last session to the state’s corporate farming law, which dates back to 1932. For the Nov. 8 ballot, a group is gathering signatures for a measure to place a crime victim’s bill of rights based on the 2008 California law known as “Marsy’s Law” in the state constitution. Two groups are gathering signatures for a marijuana initiative: one is pursuing a medical marijuana measure, and the other is looking for straight legalization in the state.

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Nick Smith has been covering state politics for The Bismarck Tribune since December 2011. From April 2009 to December 2011 he covered local government and energy news for The Williston Herald.
1. JOBS: Job growth and wage gaps
Ohio has steadily added jobs over the past six years, though the pace continues to trail the national average. Even as the labor force has become firmer, income disparity remains a key concern, as many new jobs pay less than those lost, especially in manufacturing. Free school lunch data, a measure of poverty, is relatively unchanged since the end of the recession. Majority Republicans have cut the state income tax by 16 percent and provided small businesses with major income tax deductions. If Ohio's budget remains solid, look for additional tax cuts in the future.

2. DRUGS: Drug addiction and medical marijuana
Ohio saw a record 2,482 overdose deaths in 2014. State lawmakers increased the availability of Naloxone, a drug that pulls victims out of a potentially fatal drug overdose, and it was used 12,000 times in the first nine months of 2015. The drug addiction problem remains severe all over the state, with heroin, prescription drugs, and the synthetic opiate fentanyl causing much of the damage. Meanwhile, groups continue to pursue efforts to place medical marijuana back on the ballot. Legislative leaders are reluctantly exploring how they might legalize it with tight restraints.

3. EDUCATION: Testing and charter schools
The pendulum continues to swing on the use of state testing to track results and accountability. First it was deemed there wasn’t enough testing, then there was too much. Ohio’s one-year experiment with the PARCC tests ended after complaints across the state. Lawmakers hope things will settle down going forward. Meanwhile, officials are waiting to see if new charter school oversight laws improve performance - laws passed after Ohio’s charter-school chief resigned for rigging charter sponsor scores. More recently, questions have arisen about attendance at online schools.

4. PRISONS/CORRECTIONS: Sentencing reform and the death penalty
Lawmakers created the Ohio Criminal Justice Recodification Committee to come up with “smart on crime” recommendations. That potentially calls for shorter sentences and fewer people imprisoned for nonviolent drug crimes. There appears to be bipartisan support to make what supporters hope will be sweeping changes. Meanwhile, Ohio has 139 inmates on Death Row but hasn’t put anyone to death since January 2014, when an inmate gasped for 26 minutes from a never-tries, two-drug combo the state later abandoned. Since then, the state has struggled mightily to find the drugs it needs for an execution.

5. ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT: Dams, lead and algae
A popular tourist lake was largely drained last summer when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers deemed the earthen dam likely to fail. State records show about 200 earthen dams in Ohio are considered high-hazard because if they fail, people could die. One-third of state-owned dams are deficient, and the state rarely enforces the law to ensure that dams are fixed. Meanwhile, the state is dealing with a lead-contaminated water issue in the village of Sebring, and as summer approaches, Ohioans will again keep watch for algae blooms that have plagued Lake Erie and other freshwater inland lakes.

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A newspaper reporter for 20 years, Jim Siegel has spent the last 15 of those covering state government for Gannett Newspapers, the Cincinnati Enquirer and the Columbus Dispatch. Since joining the Dispatch in 2005, he has focused on the policy and politics of the Ohio General Assembly including elections and the last six state budgets.
1. BUDGET: $1.3 million deficit
After a decade of falling state income tax rates and increasing tax breaks for businesses, an oil bust hit the state hard, and created a huge budget hole. Oklahoma will have $1.3 billion less to spend in the fiscal year beginning July 1, 2016, than it had in the previous fiscal year. Additionally, two “revenue failures” have been declared, meaning the state is not taking in enough money to pay its bills. This forced two sets of across-the-board spending cuts, a three percent reduction in December, and a four percent reduction in March.

2. BUDGET/TAXES: Tax reform
The state legislature is considering changes that would improve its flexibility in writing a budget and has authorized a study of tax breaks to see if some should be eliminated.

3. EDUCATION: School funding
Teachers have been demanding a raise for years in Oklahoma, but the chances of one this year seem slow because of state budget issues. Among legislators consensus has been reached that something must be done to make teacher pay more competitive with surrounding states. Oklahoma teachers are among the lowest paid in the nation. David Boren, the head of the University of Oklahoma, has launched a penny sales tax initiative drive intended to provide more money for education.

4. PRISONS/CORRECTIONS: Executions create controversy
A series of problems with execution procedures in Oklahoma grabbed national headlines this year. In one case, an IV line was not properly set, which caused the condemned man to writhe and groan for 43 minutes before death. In another, the state used or attempted to use a drug that was not part of the official protocol, prompting a grand jury investigation and resignations from top Corrections Department officials.

5. ENVIRONMENT: Oil industry blamed for earthquakes
State regulators are trying to restrict use of some injection wells to reduce earthquakes that have caused structural damage and unsettled residents. State regulators are working with the Oklahoma oil industry to solve the problem.

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1. ECONOMY: Unease remains despite recovery
Although Oregon’s unemployment rate has now dropped below pre-recession levels – it was 4.8 percent in February, the lowest in 21 years – the length and depth of the downturn fostered a sense of unease among many Oregonians.

2. URBAN/RURAL DIVIDE: Widening gap
Oregon has always been split with most people living west of the Cascades, but the economic divide between urban and rural areas has also been growing. Jobs have been increasing in the Portland metropolitan area, where the unemployment rate is 4.4 percent, but in most counties south of the populous Willamette Valley and east of the Cascades, unemployment rates continue to hover in the 7-8 percent range. A recent public opinion survey found that 62 percent of those responding believe that most of Oregon’s resources go to cities.

3. BUDGET/TAXES: November tax fight looms
A potential ballot measure for the November general election is poised to divide labor unions and business interests in what is certain to be an expensive campaign. Public employee unions support a measure to raise taxes by $2.6 billion annually on large corporations that do business in Oregon; they say the money is needed for schools and other public services, and that businesses are not paying their share. Business groups argue that how the tax is structured will have unintended negative effects on a range of businesses. The measure began with solid support, but has not yet qualified for the ballot.

4. TRANSPORTATION: Roads and bridges need more money
Lawmakers agree that more money needs to be raised for transportation projects. The most recent major funding package was approved seven years ago. Congressional approval last year of a five-year federal spending plan will generate only modest improvements for Oregon. Roads and bridges are aging, particularly in the Portland metropolitan area where traffic congestion has gotten worse.

5. PENSIONS: A looming problem
The state Supreme Court largely nullified lawmakers’ 2013 effort to pare future cost-of-living increases for public retirees by ruling that the reductions could not be retroactive. It’s similar to court rulings in other states on public pensions. The 2015 decision by the court doubled the projected liability of Oregon’s system to at least $18 billion spread over the next few decades, most of it to pay benefits to public workers hired before the system was overhauled in 2003. Pension contribution rates for state and local agencies are forecast to jump from 18 to 30 percent of payroll costs in the next few years, starting in 2017, which could result in higher taxes or reduced spending for other purposes.

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1. BUDGET/TAXES: To raise or not to raise?
Taxes - and whether or not to hike them - top the list of reasons for why Pennsylvania remains mired in an 8-month-long (and counting) budget impasse. The Republican-controlled legislature has resisted the Democratic governor’s calls to increase the state’s sales and personal income tax to generate new revenue. The governor argues that without a reliable source of revenue going forward, the state will be forced to make devastating cuts to critical programs and services that rely on state aid.

2. EDUCATION: More money for public schools
For more than a decade, the question of how much money the state should spend on public education - and in particular, how those dollars should be distributed among school districts - has dominated annual budget debates. The issue is critical in Pennsylvania, where individual communities shoulder a large portion of the school-funding burden. Poor districts that do not have the same ability as wealthier ones to raise revenue locally rely heavily on state funding, struggling to provide the same quality of education. Cuts to public education under the previous administration hit the state’s poor districts the hardest, with many seeing class sizes balloon and with some forced to slash guidance counselors and full-time nurses.

3. PENSIONS: A key sticking point in budget negotiations
There is little dispute among elected officials that Pennsylvania’s large pension debt is a problem, but there is no consensus on how to solve it. Like taxes, pension reform is a key sticking point in budget negotiations. The state’s pension problem was created by a combination of generous enhancements over the years to member and retiree benefits, lackluster investment returns, and nearly a decade of underfunding by state government and local school districts. Pension costs are only projected to increase, threatening to gobble most of any additional revenue coming into state coffers and leading to steep cuts and even steeper property tax increases.

4. MARIJUANA: Legalization of medical marijuana
The state could decide this year whether to legalize the use of medical marijuana for patients suffering from conditions including cancer, post-traumatic stress disorder, and epilepsy. Unlike many other issues before the legislature in Pennsylvania, this is not one that divides along partisan lines: the GOP-controlled Senate twice approved legislation, but the Republican-controlled House has repeatedly raised concerns or blocked a vote on the issue. Nonetheless, a top House Republican has promised a vote on the bill this spring. Gov. Tom Wolf, a Democrat, has said he would sign legislation if it reaches his desk.

5. ECONOMY: Minimum wage increase gaining momentum
In March of this year, Wolf signed an executive order raising the minimum wage by nearly $3 an hour for state employees under his direct authority and workers on jobs contracted by the state. They will now be paid $10.15 an hour, up from $7.25. Though it will only affect a fraction of the state’s workforce, it could help give momentum to debate over hiking the minimum wage for all residents.

EXTRA

OPIOID CRISIS: A move to prevention
Calling opioid use a “crisis” in Pennsylvania, the governor’s office has made its prevention a top priority. The administration signed a statewide standing order in 2015 to allow anyone to purchase naloxone at pharmacies without a prescription. Naloxone is a medication that reverses the effects of overdoses caused by opioid drugs, such as prescription painkillers and heroin. The administration has also equipped the Pennsylvania State Police with the medication, and supports its use in schools.

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1. BUDGET: Economic crisis
Puerto Rico is suffering an economic crisis and is unable to pay its $72 billion debt. The U.S. commonwealth cannot declare bankruptcy nor go to international lending agencies. Congress is working on a bill to restructure the public debt and create a fiscal control board.

2. STATEHOOD: Divided over status
Puerto Rico is divided over whether to remain a commonwealth, become a state or become an independent country. Independence and statehood supporters see fiscal crisis as an opportunity to put an end to commonwealth status. The crisis is setting the stage for a statehood victory.

3. ECONOMY: Puerto Ricans migrating to mainland en masse
A mass migration of Puerto Ricans to the mainland is occurring thanks to the island’s fiscal and economic crisis. Many of those moving are professionals, which is eroding the tax base and making the crisis worse.

4. ENVIRONMENTAL: Groups oppose incinerator
A waste-to-energy project proposed for the eastern city of Arecibo is opposed by environmental groups who say it will contaminate the Caño Tiburones wetlands. Opponents say that the project is nothing but an incinerator that will contaminate both land and air.

5. CIVIL RIGHTS: Governor to recognize same sex marriage, despite court ruling
Puerto Rican Gov. Alejandro Garcia Padilla said he would abide by the U.S. Supreme Court ruling on same sex marriage after a local court deemed gay marriage unconstitutional. Garcia Padilla said the local court does not have the authority to make such a ruling.

Did You Know?
States have introduced 103,111 bills so far* this year.
7,284 of those bills were signed/enacted by the jurisdictions. *January 1 to April 25

Do You Know How We Know?
We keep track of it in StateTrack, so we never miss a bill.
1. JOBS: Rhode Island’s slow road to recovery
Rhode Island’s economy has continued its slow recovery from the recession, but it has yet to regain the pre-recession level of employment. While it’s no longer in the top five for states with the highest unemployment rates, many residents feel they remain left out of progress. Democratic Gov. Gina Raimondo, who took office in 2014, has responded with a multi-faceted economic development approach that includes incentives and skill-training and the state was a surprising finalist for General Electric’s new corporate headquarters. Still, Rhode Island’s attempt to overcome years of economic underperformance remains a work in progress.

2. ELECTIONS: Lagging trust in government
Voters are cranky, as seen in the sharp debate over a new plan backed by Raimondo to raise infrastructure funds through tolls on big trucks. A new Brown University poll shows only 50 percent of voters think the state is headed in the right direction. That’s an improvement from earlier findings, but still a telling indicator of public attitudes. Part of the lack of confidence in government stems from the 2012 failure of 38 Studios, a video game company owned by former Red Sox star Curt Schilling, which left taxpayers on the hook after the state attracted the company with a $75 million state-backed loan guarantee.

3. TRANSPORTATION: Infrastructure plan sparks sharp debate
In February, Gov. Raimondo signed a law calling for new tolls on big commercial trucks. The question is what’s the impact on business and legislative elections. Supporters of the plan say the infrastructure fix is necessary to improve bridges, rated the worst in the nation, and they dismiss talk of an adverse impact on business. Republican lawmakers and other critics contend the tolls, which will take more than a year to put in place, send an anti-business message.

4. MARIJUANA: Wait-and-see mode on legalization
Lawmakers seem unlikely to legalize marijuana this election year, but may act quickly in 2017, if Massachusetts moves ahead. A proposal to legalize marijuana and regulate and tax it like alcohol has attracted more support in the state Senate than in the House, where lawmakers appear unlikely to act on the issue in this election year. House Speaker Nicholas Mattiello has signaled the chamber may take action early in 2017, if Massachusetts’s voters decide this November to legalize marijuana.

5. ELECTIONS: Republicans fight for relevance
The GOP holds just 16 legislative seats in the 113-member General Assembly, and the GOP got locked out of statewide and federal races in 2014 for the first time in decades. Republicans hope to tap the toll issue to make legislative gains this fall, but it remains to be seen if this strategy will work.

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1. INFRASTRUCTURE: Record flooding exposes weaknesses in infrastructure
The South Carolina Senate passed legislation in March – facetiously referred to as the “patch act” by opponents – that sets aside $400 million to repair the state’s roads. Legislators have worked on a fix to the state’s crumbling infrastructure for more than a year, which was exacerbated by record flooding in October 2015. House members passed legislation last year that included a 10-cents-per-gallon tax increase for fuel, which would create a dedicated funding source to tackle decades of deterioration. The battle is expected to continue between the chambers to find a way to fund the $1.2 billion in repairs the state’s Department of Transportation director says is needed.

2. EDUCATION: Lawmakers approaching deadline to reform state’s rural schools
The South Carolina legislature is working against the clock to make education reforms to level the playing field for students in poor and rural districts. In a more than 20-year-old case, the state Supreme Court ruled in November 2014 that the General Assembly had not done its job to make sure all students received at least a basic education – and gave lawmakers until the end of this session, in June, to make sufficient strides toward fixing the disparity. Some state lawmakers, including Gov. Nikki Haley, have fought the order, saying the ruling was an overreach of the court’s power. Bills are working their way through the legislature, but reforms have yet to become law.

3. ETHICS: Clock ticking for ethics reform
Once considered a priority issue, ethics reform in South Carolina stalled halfway through the state’s two-year session and political onlookers say they don’t expect movement this year. Last January, the House took up the challenge of passing a series of bills that addressed different aspects of ethics reform. The Senate has yet to pass any of those bills, partly because senators insist their self-policing is working and only the House had a problem it needed to clean up. The Senate is expected to debate the issue in April, though few expect passage of any bills. Proponents say any meaningful reform must include requiring lawmakers to disclose sources of income, be investigated by an independent panel when suspected of wrongdoing, and to disclose spending on campaign materials by third-party groups.

4. CRIME/POLICING: Charleston shooting inspires renewed push for gun control laws
The June shooting death of nine worshippers at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, allegedly by an avowed white supremacist, has reignited calls for gun reform in South Carolina. Being a conservative state, with a Republican governor and GOP majorities in the House and Senate, the likelihood of any gun reform passing the statehouse is slim. Democrats in both the House and Senate filed several bills this year to close what has become known as the “Charleston loophole.” Dylann Roof, who is charged in the shootings, should have been prevented from purchasing guns because of a drug arrest in February 2015. However, federal law gives the FBI three business days to tell a dealer if someone can’t legally buy a gun and once those three days pass, the dealer can sell the gun. Proposals in South Carolina would stretch that time to 28 days.

5. PRISONS/CORRECTIONS: “Holding Pen” for young gang members
Several years of dwindling budgets have caused staffing shortfalls in the state Department of Juvenile Justice. A recent riot at DJJ facilities spurred calls for changes to be made to get things under control. Staffers say the facility has become a “holding pen” for gang members and a decreased budget has left the department without a police chief or gang specialist. Officials have started making changes to address the concerns, including creating a rapid response team and instituting stiffer penalties when the juveniles misbehave. The House budget-writing panel has included money for raises for corrections officers, with the department director saying low pay has led to high turnover.

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1. EDUCATION: **Bold solutions for boosting teacher pay**

For the first time in decades South Dakota lawmakers approved a half-cent sales tax to boost teacher pay, which is the lowest in the nation. After a yearlong study, a governor-appointed taskforce recommended that the state take bold action to overhaul the its 20-year-old education funding system and provide additional means to attract and retain teachers. At Gov. Dennis Daugaard’s recommendation, lawmakers approved a series of bills that change the funding formula for public schools, create mentoring and e-learning programs, and set up a tax, which could bump up the state’s average target teacher salary by $8,000. Legislators also allocated funds to create innovation charter schools for American Indian communities. The conversation of school choice also entered the legislature with a bill that would provide tax credits for insurance companies that provide scholarship dollars to the state’s private and parochial schools.

2. HEALTHCARE: **Striking a deal on Medicaid expansion**

After years of trying to work with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to improve healthcare for the state’s American Indian residents, Daugaard reframed the dialogue as a potential bargain. A state healthcare coalition approached the Department and said the state would consider Medicaid expansion if the Indian Health Service could improve its healthcare services in South Dakota hospitals. Daugaard presented the proposal to lawmakers in December and toured the state to present it to various stakeholders. He said he wouldn’t move forward unless the legislature and the state’s American Indian tribes agreed, and only if the proposal was budget neutral to South Dakota.

3. CIVIL RIGHTS: **Waging a battle on transgender policies**

Spurred by state and federal interpretation of transgender policies, a group of conservative lawmakers brought a set of bills aimed at restricting the rights of transgender people, and enhancing the protections for those who refuse to recognize their gender identity. South Dakota was on the brink of becoming the first state to create a transgender bathroom policy for public schools, but Daugaard vetoed the measure saying it was unnecessary, and would create legal problems for school districts. Lawmakers have suggested that they plan to bring similar legislation next year. Lawmakers also brought a bill that would provide additional protections to conservative Christians who express their beliefs.

4. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY AND OVERSIGHT: **Call for transparency**

South Dakota lawmakers pushed for additional oversight of state agencies and their employees, as well as for groups that contract with the state. They also considered legislation that requires certain state agency and board members to divulge potential conflicts of interest. The push for additional oversight stemmed from a September scandal involving an educational cooperative contracted by the state to administer a federal grant. Hours after the state terminated a multimillion-dollar contract with the cooperative the group’s business director killed his four children and his wife, before setting his home ablaze and turning the gun on himself. The employee was a board member for other groups that benefitted financially from the cooperative and the state contract. A joint federal and state probe determined in March that the employee had embezzled almost $1 million in state and federal funds.

5. BUDGET/TAXES: **Finding a shot of revenue for cities and counties**

County governments again asked South Dakota lawmakers for another revenue source to offset the costs of incarcerating criminals and caring for the indigent. They requested a shot at the state’s alcoholic beverage fund, and asked the state to refund some of their expenses such as unpredictable jail and court costs. Unlike municipalities, counties don’t get sales tax revenue, or revenue from liquor sales. City governments also sought another revenue stream to help them fund infrastructure projects that had been put off for years due to lack of available funds. A legislative panel took up the issue during a 2015 study and could again consider solutions in 2016.

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1. **BUDGET**: Determining how to spend a budget surplus

With a budget surplus, Gov. Bill Haslam has carved out a chunk of the state’s revenue to go towards education funding. He is also investing $100 million in the state’s Rainy Day Fund, which will put it at the second-highest level since the fund was created. The budget will also include putting more money into drug recovery and veterans court, while also paying back money previously borrowed to cover general spending needs by previous Tennessee governors.

2. **EDUCATION**: Major investments, and changes afoot

Both K-12 and higher education received good news this year when Haslam outlined his legislative agenda, which includes pay raises for teachers, finances for maintenance projects, and putting more money into a continued effort to encourage the state’s residents to obtain a college degree or certificate.

The governor is also pushing efforts to restructure the state’s largest college system by breaking it up into independent boards. Lawmakers have expressed interest in tackling several education issues, ranging from a limited school vouchers program to finding ways to address rising tuition.

3. **PRISONS/CORRECTIONS**: Fixing the state’s justice system

Democrats and Republicans, including Haslam, are working on advancing efforts to overhaul the state’s prison system after a taskforce examining sentencing made several recommendations including increasing the penalties for those convicted of domestic violence, aggravated burglary, or drug trafficking. Democrats want wholesale changes, but Republicans are looking for more measured approaches. Both sides are pushing legislation that would reduce the number of people in prison for low-level offenses.

4. **CIVIL RIGHTS**: Pushing back against the Federal Government

Following several U.S. Supreme Court decisions that resulted in the legalization of same-sex marriage, Tennessee lawmakers are looking for any way to show constituents they disagree with various decisions from the high court and the federal government. Officials are pushing legislation to remind the federal government of Tennessee’s sovereignty, as well as expressing disagreement with several federal initiatives including the federal Refugee Act of 1980 and the Affordable Care Act.

5. **OUTSOURCING**: Government privatization

A Haslam-led plan to outsource the management of state owned property, including colleges, prisons and state parks, is one that has caused great concern among thousands of state employees, as well as many lawmakers. Critics of Tennessee’s privatization efforts were further fueled after a private contractor bungled the rollout of the state’s standardized testing on the first day of exams. Outsourcing is expected to remain a hot topic of discussion this year.

**EXTRA**

**HEALTHCARE**:

As many as 280,000 Tennesseans are estimated to be without healthcare as a result of lawmakers rejecting Haslam’s alternative plan to Medicaid expansion, which he introduced in 2015. Citizens have vowed to continue to remind lawmakers of the pressing need to expand coverage, but Haslam, as well as Republican leaders in the House and Senate, have opted to wait until after the November presidential election to move forward on the issue.

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1. IMMIGRATION: Border security
Immigration and border security dominate the state’s issue list, in part because it’s a conservative state and those issues have played a prominent role in the GOP presidential conversation, and because Texas has more than half of the country’s border with Mexico. It’s also an economic and cultural issue.

2. BUDGET: Falling oil prices and school funding
State finance encompasses a number of sub-issues, including falling oil prices, pending litigation over the constitutionality of the state’s school finance system, property taxes, litigation over taxes on certain types of pipelines, slower but still positive growth in the state’s sales tax revenue, and continuing growth in healthcare. The state budget will, as usual, be front and center when the legislature meets next January.

3. ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT: Falling oil prices make lawmakers pause
This is intertwined with the state budget, but also extends into the state’s general economy. Energy is not as big a part of the economy as it was in the mid-1980s – when its collapse brought the state along with it – but it’s still very big. Plus, the state’s fast growth over the last decade has begun to slow.

4. ELECTIONS: Federalism
Texas politicians have been dining out for years on their war with Washington. From the Tea Party to Rick Perry’s “Fed Up”, to Greg Abbott’s call for a convention of states, to claim some of the powers now wielded by the federal government. Republican antipathy for a Democratic president has fed this, but there’s more to it: Texas and perhaps some other states really would like to trim Washington’s sails – no matter who lives at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

5. STATE VS. LOCAL: Local and state lawmakers at odds
The new set of state officials who took office in 2015 started an unexpected argument with local governments over who should be making laws that have local effect. Denton’s ban on fracking started that – it’s now under state control – but the conversation has expanded to include issues like bans on plastic bags, texting-while-driving laws, sanctuary cities, and perhaps even how police handle relatively minor legal infractions like possession of small amounts of marijuana. It’s a new minefield that could occupy legislators for years.

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Ross Ramsey is executive editor and co-founder of The Texas Tribune. He’s worked in Texas media for nearly four decades, excepting a short but educational stint in Texas government.
1. HEALTHCARE: Medicaid expansion
For more than three years, the Republican-dominated legislature has steadfastly refused Obamacare funding to expand Medicaid benefits for those making less than 138 percent of the federal poverty level. Twice plans have been put forward by Gov. Gary Herbert – once in conjunction with legislative leaders from both chambers – only to suffer embarrassing defeats. Democrats have repeatedly pushed for full Medicaid expansion, but the efforts were crushed. In 2016, lawmakers took a step toward covering that population, approving a proposal that would cover about 16,000 of the states poorest, giving priority to the chronically homeless, those with drug and mental health issues, and recently released inmates. Legislators also hope that if a Republican is in the White House in 2017, the new administration might grant the state more latitude in how to draft a Medicaid proposal.

2. MARIJUANA: Medical marijuana
For the last two legislative sessions, advocates for making the state the 24th in the country to legalize medical marijuana have made steady progress. In 2016, legislation passed the Senate, and a compromise version appeared headed for a close vote in the House, despite opposition from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the predominant faith in the state and an influential force in Utah’s Capitol. But budget bosses didn’t provide money to implement the regulatory framework if the bill passed, and it died on the last night of the session. Proponents of the bill promise it will return with legislation next year, although the sponsor of one of the two competing measures is retiring. Patient advocates, frustrated with the more cautious, incremental approach considered by the legislature, have already lined up millionaire financial backers to begin a signature-gathering effort to put a much broader legalization measure than lawmakers considered on the 2018 ballot.

3. EDUCATION: Funding for education
Each year, legislative leaders say funding education is the top budget priority, and over the last five years, legislators have pumped more than $1.6 billion of new money into public schools and Utah’s colleges and universities. Notwithstanding that investment, due in part to Utah’s large families, the state remains at or near the bottom of the nation each year in per-pupil spending, and has some of the largest class sizes in the country. Democrats have pushed for income tax increases in the past – under Utah’s Constitution all income tax revenue is earmarked to education – but have suffered defeats. In recent years, however, they have been joined by influential business interests and former lawmakers, who have organized a group called Education First that is also advocating for a tax increase for public education.

4. ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT: Public lands
Roughly 60 percent of the land in Utah is owned by the federal government and oil, gas, ranching and other rural Utah interests have complained for decades that heavy-handed federal control has stymied economic development and led to management conflicts. Over the last several years, a group of lawmakers have spearheaded an effort to sue the federal government, demanding Congress turn over management of more than 30 million acres of federal Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service land to the state. They claim Utah is entitled under the Constitution to the same treatment that eastern states have received. The movement was tarnished somewhat after a pair of standoffs with Clive Bundy-backed militias in Nevada and Oregon. But in 2016, Utah lawmakers appropriated $4.5 million that could be used as the first installment on potential litigation, which is projected to cost as much as $14 million. Currently, the decision on whether to go to court rests in the hands of Gov. Herbert and Attorney General Sean Reyes, who have been noncommittal on whether they support going to court.

5. BUDGET/TAXES: Internet sales tax
For several years, Republican Senators Curt Bramble and Wayne Harper have been beating the drum on the need to collect sales tax on Internet sales. Now unpaid sales taxes on online purchases are costing Utah an estimated $190 million in uncollected revenue. The legislature has passed resolutions urging Congress to address the issue, and Washington has been moving slowly in that direction. In the 2016 session a pair of bills were proposed that would have had the state begin taxing entities with “nexus” in Utah. Harper’s bill passed the Senate and failed in the House, after opposition from anti-tax groups, particularly the Koch-backed Americans for Prosperity. A similar bill in the House that would have cut the general sales tax to offset the revenue collected online – so as not to appear to be a tax increase in an election year – never got off the ground. The sponsor walked away from the bill after facing opposition from “Mommy bloggers” and so-called affiliate marketers who are paid to review products for Amazon and other online retailers. Their concern was that the retailers would terminate their contracts to avoid having nexus and being forced to pay taxes in the state. Barring congressional action, the legislation will likely return in 2017.
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Robert Gehrke has been covering politics and government for nearly two decades, beginning his career with the Associated Press and joining The Salt Lake Tribune in 2005. He spent nearly seven years covering Congress and federal agencies in Washington, D.C., before returning home to Utah where he covers the state Legislature and politics. He has received numerous state and regional awards for his reporting and has been nominated three times for the Pulitzer Prize, twice for helping break an influence-peddling scandal that ultimately drove the state attorney general from office. In his spare time, the father of two enjoys live music, hiking and baseball.

Did You Know?

States have introduced **24,082** Education bills and resolutions so far* this year.

**2,592** Education bills and resolutions have been passed by the legislatures in that same time period.

*January 1 to April 25

Do You Know How We Know?

We keep track of it in StateTrack, so we never miss a bill.
1. ELECTIONS: Bernie Sanders goes mainstream
Initially viewed by pundits as running a quixotic presidential campaign, Sen. Bernie Sanders has become an electoral force. A November survey found him to be the country's most popular senator with his own constituents, and that showed on Super Tuesday when he beat former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton 86-14 in Vermont's primary. His rise came as no surprise to Vermonters who have witnessed his strengths on and off the campaign trail for decades in the Green Mountains, but there's little expectation that he'll prevail.

2. MARIJUANA: Lawmakers make stoned driving prevention a priority
Vermont could soon become the first state in the nation to legalize recreational marijuana via the legislature, rather than ballot box. In February, the state senate passed a bill that would legalize possession and retail sale on January 2, 2018. The bill also contains provisions to ramp up education, treatment, and stoned-driving enforcement efforts ahead of that date. Gov. Peter Shumlin has thrown the full weight of his influence behind the bill. However, the House will be a tough sell despite being considered the more liberal of Vermont’s two chambers. House Speaker Shap Smith, unlike the governor, says his concerns about safe driving and diversion of marijuana to youth have not been assuaged yet.

3. HEALTHCARE: Exchange floundering
Vermont’s Healthcare exchange continues to make painfully slow progress towards full functionality. While the Republican minority would like to scrap it for the federal version, Vermont tied Medicaid eligibility determinations into its site. Finding an alternate path forward would be expensive – many including the Governor argue prohibitively so – and could lead to another difficult IT project. Vermont’s senators and representatives are also wrestling with how to fund the state’s Medicaid expansion from a couple of years ago. The governor proposed expanding the provider tax for doctors and medical facilities to fill the bulk of the approximately $55 million dollar shortfall. That’s yielded little support from lawmakers – though they have yet to come forward with a counter-proposal.

4. EDUCATION: School governance consolidation
Vermont spends more per student and per capita on pre-K-12 education than any other state. Last year the legislature passed a reform bill aimed at consolidating the state’s 273 school districts – many of which serve only one school, and in some instances fewer than 100 students. Financial carrots and sticks within the bill have led about a dozen communities to pursue consolidation. The aim is to achieve administrative savings, helping to contain costs and curtail rising property taxes. When coupled with soft spending caps on district spending increases, taxes are expected to level off this year. But, the reprieve may be short-lived as most areas tapped rainy-day funds to keep costs low. That option may not be available next year.

5. ELECTIONS: Statewide elections to heat up
Shumlin is not seeking re-election this year. While four candidates have been in the race since the fall, the campaigns have yet to heat up. Despite the state’s left leaning, Republican Lt. Gov. Phil Scott is the best-known name in the race. He’s up against former Bear Stearns executive Bruce Lisman. On the Democratic side, former Transportation Secretary Sue Minter will square off against former State Senator and Google Community Affairs Director, Matt Dunne. Democratic House Speaker Shap Smith dropped out of the race in November to focus on family as his wife was battling breast cancer. She’s on the mend and he could jump back into that race or the lieutenant governor contest.

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Kyle Midura joined the Channel 3 News Team in September of 2011 after beginning his career with the NBC-affiliate in Billings, Montana. The move represented a homecoming for Kyle, who grew up in the southwestern corner of Vermont. He is now WCAX's capitol bureau chief.
1. ETHICS: Trust and transparency
No single controversy or piece of legislation is the focus here, but Virginians’ sense that government is out of touch and unaccountable permeates politics. This issue surfaces in debates over the huge gaps in the Freedom of Information Act, non-partisan redistricting, and the regulation of political ethics.

2. ELECTIONS: Partisan battles
Term-limited Democratic Gov., Terry McAuliffe, and an overwhelmingly Republican House of Delegates adamantly opposed to his push on Medicaid expansion, stance on clean power, and capital budget plans, remain deadlocked. Both sides are posturing, for both the 2016 national and 2017 elections, when Virginia elects a governor and House of Delegates.

3. HEALTHCARE: Hospital wars
Access and cost of healthcare remains an unresolved issue in Virginia. The legislature’s opposition to expanding Medicaid has morphed into a push to do away with the Certificate of Public Necessity program that requires state approval of new or expanded hospital and clinic facilities. Proponents say more facilities will lower costs, hospitals say it will make it more difficult to keep offering money-losing services subsidized by more profitable lines of business.

4. HEALTHCARE: Mental health
As always, there’s plenty of hand wringing about Virginia’s badly underfunded community mental health services. With waiting lists of thousands of people, lack of crisis care, and thousands languishing in jails, Virginians know this is a major failing in public responsibility.

5. TRANSPORTATION: Tolls
Revenue for Virginia’s congested, potholed roads continues to fall far short of the cost to solve the problem. Yet whenever the idea of tolls to pay for new facilities is floated, opposition is firm – and loud.

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1. EDUCATION: Proper funding may mean tax hike
The state of Washington is in contempt of court and the Supreme Court has imposed a $100,000 per day fine for the legislature’s failure to come up with a plan to fully fund public schools by 2018. In response, the first bill Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee signed in the 2016 session, is a promissory note that commits the legislature to take action by the end of the 2017 session, to eliminate the reliance on local levies to fund basic education. The measure also says it’s the intent of the legislature to provide state funding for “competitive salaries and benefits” that are sufficient to hire and retain teachers and school staff. The price tag for delivering on this promise has been pegged at $3 billion to $4 billion in the next two years. Critics on the right say by putting this pledge into law sets the stage for a major tax hike next year. Critics on the left say this is just another stall tactic that puts off for another year the hard task of finding a new dedicated source of funding for K-12 education.

2. EDUCATION: Charter Schools
Last fall, the Washington Supreme Court tossed out a voter-approved charter school law as unconstitutional. That put about 1,100 students in eight charter schools statewide into limbo, just before the start of school. Private interests including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation stepped in to temporarily keep the schools open. As soon as the legislature convened in January, proposals were introduced to revive charter schools in Washington. The Republican-led state Senate quickly passed a measure to fund charter schools using lottery proceeds, instead of state general funds. Facing fierce opposition from the Education Association, the bill stalled in the Democratic-controlled Washington House until near the end of the regular session. That’s when House leadership allowed a vote on the bill. Minority Republicans and a handful of Democrats formed a majority-voting bloc to send it to the governor. Assuming the governor signs it, the next question is whether it will face another constitutional challenge by charter school opponents.

3. COURTS/LEGAL ISSUES: Police and deadly force
Recent police shootings in Washington have sparked protests and fueled demands to change the state’s 30-year-old deadly force law. That law says officers can only be charged if they acted in bad faith and with malice. Amnesty International has called Washington’s law “the most egregious” in the nation. The Seattle Times, in a series called “Shielded By The Law,” found that from 2005 to 2014, police shot and killed 212 people in Washington State, but only one officer was charged. And he was ultimately acquitted. The paper quoted King County Prosecutor Dan Satterberg as saying: “This almost perfect defense to a mistaken use of force has kept police officers out of court as defendants.” A proposal to change Washington’s deadly force law morphed into a bipartisan measure to create a joint legislative task force to review deadly force laws and recommend “best practices” to reduce the number of deadly encounters between police and the public. Separately, Washington lawmakers voted to create a task force to study police body cameras.

4. BUDGET: Fires, teacher shortage and hospital funding
Washington House Democrats and Senate Republicans concluded a special session on March 29 after weeks of deadlock over an update to the state’s two-year budget. The final deal pays fighting last summer’s devastating wildfires in central Washington state, puts more money into the state’s mental hospitals, and begins to address Washington’s teacher shortage. The supplemental budget dips into the state’s Rainy Day fund as proposed by Democrats, but still balances over four years as Republicans demanded. When lawmakers failed to reach a budget deal within the 60-day regular session, Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee vetoed 27 bills as a penalty. “I recognize that this is perhaps the largest batch of vetoes in state history,” Inslee said. “(But) none of these vetoed bills were as important as the fundamental responsibility of the legislature to produce a balanced budget.” In the final hours of the special session, the Washington House and Senate voted to override those vetoes – the first overrides in Washington State since 1998.

5. PRISONS/CORRECTIONS: Early release mistake
In December, Inslee announced that for 13 years the Washington Department of Corrections had been miscalculating release dates for certain prison inmates convicted of crimes that earned them enhanced sentences. As a result, approximately 3,000 inmates had gotten out days, weeks, or even months before their time was up. Two of those former inmates are charged with homicides committed during the time they were supposed to still be locked up. The problem was traced to a computer coding error that had been flagged by a victim’s family in 2012, but was never corrected by the Department of Corrections. The governor ordered an independent investigation that’s now been completed. At the same time, Senate Republicans announced their own inquiry. In a rare move, the Senate Law and Justice committee issued subpoenas to obtain documents from the governor and Department of Corrections. The Committee also hired an investigator, and has held hearings and put witnesses under oath. The dueling investigations have heightened already strained relations between Inslee, who’s up for re-election this year, and Senate Republicans.
TRANSPORTATION: Sacking of Secretary of Transportation
Perhaps the most surprising event of the 2016 legislative session was the sacking of Washington’s Secretary of Transportation. On a Friday afternoon in February, Senate Republicans suddenly brought to the floor the confirmation of Secretary Lynn Peterson, who had already been in the job for three years. It quickly became clear that for the first time in nearly 20 years, the state Senate was prepared to not confirm a gubernatorial appointee. Republicans laid out a bill of particulars against Peterson. But the chief complaint seemed to be that her agency had botched an express lane toll project on Seattle’s busy east side. Democrats quickly came to Peterson’s defense, praising her for leading the quick rebuild of an Interstate 5 bridge that collapsed in 2013, and her agency’s response to the deadly Oso landslide in 2014. An angry Inslee called Peterson’s firing, on a 21-25 vote, a “Friday massacre” and a “decapitation.”

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Since January 2004, Austin Jenkins has been the Olympia-based political reporter for the Northwest News Network. In that position, he covers Northwest politics and public policy as well as the Washington State legislature. You can also see Austin on television as host of TVW’s (the C-SPAN of Washington State) Emmy-nominated public affairs program “Inside Olympia.”

Did You Know?
In Washington the estimated number of upcoming bills and resolutions is 2,533*.

*As of December 10, 2015
1. BUDGET: Falling energy prices and previous tax cuts result in budget shortfalls
Plunging energy prices have cut state severance tax collections on natural gas and coal to about 50 percent of projections, creating a $145 million shortfall in the state’s $4.3 billion General Revenue budget. Additionally, a series of business tax cuts, and the elimination of the state sales tax on food has reduced revenue by $400 million a year, contributing to an ongoing state funding crises.

2. TRANSPORTATION: Increased need for transportation funding
A governor’s blue ribbon panel on highways recently concluded that the state needs to double its budget for highways construction and maintenance, in order to adequately fund state roads’ needs. With no agreement on funding options, state roads are becoming hazardous.

3. JOBS: Workforce participation reaches crisis levels
Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics reports show that West Virginia has the nation’s lowest workforce participation rate at 53 percent of eligible adults. The collapse of coal, chemical, and manufacturing jobs has exacerbated that rate, putting demand on state services and making the state less attractive to new business.

4. DRUGS: State struggles with drug epidemic
West Virginia has very high levels of prescription and opioid drug abuse, resulting in high death rates, high costs for hospitalization and treatment, lost productivity, and increased crime. The severity of the problem prompted a visit to the state last fall by President Barack Obama to discuss the drug epidemic crisis.

5. HEALTHCARE: Poor health conditions cost state billions
Unhealthy lifestyles and deferred access to healthcare are costing state Medicaid and other healthcare programs billions of dollars. West Virginia has among the nation’s highest rates of tobacco use, obesity, diabetes, and other health risks. In addition to staggering costs, health problems contribute to low workforce participation, and difficulties in maintaining a quality workforce in order to attract new business investment.

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Phil Kabler is a longtime staff writer, statehouse reporter and columnist for the Charleston Gazette-Mail.
1. TRANSPORTATION: Projects face a bumpy road
Wisconsin’s roads are the fourth-worst in the nation, with 71 percent of them in poor or mediocre condition, according to a U.S. Department of Transportation study. Lawmakers have spent years looking for a long-term funding solution, but continue to rely on short-term fixes while borrowing and delaying construction projects. Options up for consideration include raising the gas tax, upping vehicle registration fees, and implementing a toll system. But with a governor averse to tax hikes, many potential approaches face an uphill battle.

2. PRISONS/CORRECTIONS: Corrections department seeks to regain public trust
The state Department of Corrections has been in sharp focus since allegations of widespread abuse at a juvenile corrections facility were reported. As the FBI investigation continues, that issue is only one of many the agency must address. Morale is low among staff with high vacancy rates and record levels of forced overtime. Criminal justice reform advocates are pushing for changes to the state’s parole policies. Gov. Scott Walker recently appointed a new Department of Corrections secretary, who previously led the agency under G ovs. Tommy Thompson and Scott McCallum. He has pledged to rebuild the public trust that has crumbled over the years.

3. HEALTHCARE: Costs continue to climb
Wisconsin is one of six states suing the federal government over a fee imposed by the Affordable Care Act. It’s also the only state to have used the ACA to expand its Medicaid program, without accepting the federal dollars available to fund that expansion. Supporters of accepting the expansion say the governor is leaving money on the table, but Walker argues the funding source isn’t a stable one. Meanwhile, costs for health services continue to increase.

4. EDUCATION: Parties split on how to make college more affordable
Walker, in his State of the State address, focused heavily on ways to make college more affordable. He frequently touts his tuition freeze on University of Wisconsin System schools, and is now promoting a Republican set of bills that include an income tax deduction on student loan interest, grant funding and financial literacy tools. But Democrats, who have been asking for a college-affordability fix for years, say the GOP effort doesn’t do enough to help graduates currently paying back student loan debt. They continue to advocate for a plan that would allow borrowers to refinance their student loans at lower interest rates – a plan Republicans say is a no-go.

5. DRUG ABUSE: Curbing drug abuse has bipartisan support
Lawmakers have been working across the aisle for several years now to combat opiate abuse. They have unanimously passed bills expanding access to the heroin overdose drug Narcan, creating guidelines for prescribers, and expanding funding for treatment alternative and diversion programs. The issue continues to be a priority for lawmakers, and Wisconsin’s Attorney General, who says it may be the most important thing he addresses while in office. Legislators still hope to expand access to detoxification, invest more in TAD programs, and remove barriers to employment for those with criminal convictions.

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Jessie Opoien covers state government and politics for the Capital Times in Madison, Wisconsin. She previously covered education and politics for the Oshkosh Northwestern.
1. ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT: Downturn hits Wyoming economy
The combination of low energy prices and increased environmental regulation has hit Wyoming’s fossil fuel-dependent economy, and promises to sap local and state revenue for the foreseeable future. After riding high on natural gas, oil, and coal for 15 years, production, jobs and revenues tied to those industries are on the decline. Wyoming leaders socked away billions of dollars in savings and had been on a spending spree, but are now tightening spending, including in social services.

2. ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT: Nation’s largest coal miners in financial straights
Two of the nation’s largest coal miners have filed for bankruptcy, and a third is expected to declare bankruptcy, throwing one of Wyoming’s stawlart economic engines into doubt. Arch Coal and Alpha Natural Resources are reorganizing under bankruptcy, and Peabody Energy is expected to follow suit. All three companies operate large mines in Wyoming’s Powder River Basin. Those economic struggles are further compounded by federal regulations aimed at curbing the climate and environmental impacts of mining and burning coal. The ramifications may force a shift in Wyoming’s tax policies as other sectors in the state shift to deal with the impacts of a warming climate.

3. HEALTHCARE: No plan to take on increasing cost of healthcare
Affordable healthcare is a perpetual challenge in rural and sparsely populated Wyoming, and a political distaste for the Affordable Care Act has left citizens of the state without much hope for relief. For the fourth year in a row, Wyoming lawmakers have rejected expanding Medicaid, which would have ushered in $268 million in federal assistance to help healthcare providers and low-income patients alike. The Wyoming legislature offered no alternative or cohesive plan to take on the increasing cost of healthcare when it met in session this year.

4. ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT: Key Wyoming species remain under threat
Despite recent decisions to remove the Yellowstone grizzly bear and not list the greater sage grouse under Endangered Species Act protections, those species – and others – may face continued threats to their longevity. The grizzly’s main food sources remain threatened by a warming climate, while development continues to fracture the sagebrush habitat – for which the greater sage grouse is an “indicator” species. Compounding concerns over Wyoming’s wildlife, a major draw for tourism and other revenue, are several key migration pathways disturbed by development and the proliferation of chronic wasting disease.

5. ELECTIONS: The equality state suffers from lack of political diversity
The Wyoming legislature holds the distinction of having the oldest average age, and fewest women and minorities in the nation. Those factors, plus a lingering low voter turnout, point to a state government that many say doesn’t accurately reflect Wyoming’s diversity in people and social interests. While the legislature recently agreed to continue spending hundreds of millions of dollars on new infrastructure, it cut budgets for social programs for the young, the elderly and the working poor.

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Dustin Bleizeffer is energy and policy reporter. He has covered energy and natural resource issues in Wyoming for 17 years.
Who’s in charge?

This map shows a breakdown of state legislative composition by political party affiliation.
Who’s in charge?

This map shows a breakdown of governors by political party affiliation.

- **Republican Governor**
- **Democrat Governor**
- **Independent**

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Does your legislative tracking tool move as fast as you do?  cqrollcall.com/statetrack
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Current as of 12.10.15
CQ Roll Call’s 50 State project began early this year with a simple question: what are the most important issues being debated in the states?

While much attention is focused on Washington, D.C. far more legislation is passed in the states. It seemed only fitting to find out more about the concerns that are driving all of those bills.

To answer that question, we reached out to the reporters who cover state legislatures and governors in all 50 states, Puerto Rico and Washington, DC. There was nothing scientific about it. Rather, we sent a survey asking these reporters to identify and rank the top five policy issues and to write a bit about each.

The first edition, released in March 2015, was a huge success. So we decided to do it again in July and this year in April. The resulting dispatches are published here.

We also labeled the issues — healthcare, education and so forth — and tabulated the data. To do so required some subjective decisions. Is a proposal to raise gas taxes to repair roads a taxation issue or a transportation issue? When these issues arose, we took them case by case and tried to remain as true to the spirit of the debate as possible.

In a few cases reporters included extra items. These bonus issues were not used when we tallied the data. Overall, more than 52 reporters from an equal number of publications participated in the project. They represent newspapers, television, radio, blogs, universities, watchdog groups and news services.

Eric Hammesfahr is the Product Owner of StateTrack, a legislative tracking solution that helps companies and associations make sense of state action. He holds two law degrees, the latest from Boston University, focusing on complex financial products.

Sahir Doshi worked as a researcher on The 50 State Project. He is a recent graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, with degrees in political science and African studies. His reporting experience includes work at CQ Roll Call, ProPublica, and on radio and TV in Uganda and India, where he grew up. He also worked on “Inside India’s Forests,” a documentary on environmental activism and tribal rights that was broadcast on National Geographic.

It is also important to note that this project would not have been possible without the editing expertise of Jamisha Ford, Randolph Walierius, Ann Dermody and Glen Justice - the original creator of the 50 State Project - and Whit Robinson for the design and layout.
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