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Legislative committees were in full swing this week and both Chambers of the Kansas Legislature saw floor action get under way. The House dealt with fewer bills and had considerably more debate than the Senate, which on Tuesday handled 25 bills with maybe one question being asked. As has been the case just about the entire Session, the issue that has consumed all the air wasn't a policy matter, but rather a news story. This time it was the assertions that Governor Brownback violated the Kansas Open Meeting Act by inviting Republicans from certain committees to Cedar Crest for dinner with him and the First Lady.

It has been common practice for governors to invite legislators to the Executive Mansion for dinner. These gatherings are typically non-partisan and often the invitations go to 20 to 25 members per evening and are in alphabetical order. The governor greets guests at the door and guests proceed inside to the enclosed sun porch. Prior to dinner the governor walks guests around the first floor, which is rather understated. It's a quick tour, as Kansas has the smallest Governor's mansion in the United States, but it does sit on the largest plot of land of executive residences. None the less, it's an enjoyable evening that legislators look forward to and governor's look forward to ending.

What's different this year and what now has Shawnee County DA Chad Taylor issuing letters to lawmakers and the administration, admonishing them to not destroy or delete any evidence related to these meetings, is that, apparently, the Governor was inviting only Republican members of certain committees. Now, remember, Republicans hold such large majorities in both Chambers, that even without a single democrat showing up, when you gather all Republicans from a committee, you have a quorum. It's not necessarily gathering those folks that makes it a problem, but if you gather those folks and talk business, well then the public must be notified in advance and the public must be allowed to attend and observe. For the record, Governor Brownback, of course, cannot be guilty of a KOMA violation since he is not a legislative body, but rather a man who just happens to be Governor.

## SENATE PASSES PUBLIC CONSUMPTION BILL

The Kansas Senate on Thursday approved a bill sought by the City of Wichita to extend the duration for permits allowing public consumption of alcohol. The Legislature had approved similar language a few years ago that allowed the Director of Alcoholic Beverage Control to issue three-day permits. The new bill will allow those permits to be issued for 30-day periods. Wichita Festivals Inc. was the major driver behind the change.

## PROPOSAL WOULD RAISE UTILITY RATES PRIOR TO KCC APPROVAL

The House Energy and Utilities Committee held a hearing on HB 2512 this week. The bill, if enacted, would allow regulated utilities to begin charging higher rates to customers 30 days after the company filed its request for a rate increase with the Kansas Corporation Commission. Currently, companies make those requests to the KCC and then often wait for nearly two years before a determination is handed down on the request. The bill would allow for companies to start charging that “new” rate sooner. If the KCC denies the request, as they often do, or allows for a smaller-than-requested rate increase, the utility would be required to refund the difference plus interest.

There’s compelling arguments on both side of the issue. Regulated utilities in Kansas are guaranteed a certain rate of return on investment. Large investments are being made by Kansas utilities in large part to comply with state and federal regulations. There’s a fair argument to be made that waiting in excess of two years to begin recouping investment is not fair to the utility or the shareholders. At the same time, requests are often made prior investment and if the KCC denies a request or rules in favor of a lower rate increase, then ratepayers, in essence, have provided the utility with a loan. The committee has yet to announce its intentions with the bill.

## BROWNBACK TEACHER PROPOSAL

Policymakers and political operatives must be careful not to formulate opinions on policy based on State House rhetoric and hallway conversations alone. Many a lawmaker has found that approach to be a fast track to retiring at the option of the voters. Perhaps this week’s Survey USA poll on Governor Sam Brownback’s proposal to post teacher evaluations online is a good reminder. The Governor’s proposal appeared dead on arrival based on hall talk, and perhaps it remains so. However, the public clearly sees the Governor’s idea as a good one. 68% of those surveyed supported the idea and 60% said they thought it would improve the education system.

## FEDERAL ISSUE FORUM WITH SENATOR MORAN

On Tuesday, February 21, Senator Moran will speak to Chamber members at a luncheon forum in the Ballroom of the Hyatt Regency Wichita. Cost to attend (including lunch) is \$35 per person. Table sponsorships are available for \$500 and include reserved seating for 8 of your business associates, co-workers or friends and your company name prominently displayed on your table. [Click here to register!](#)

## WASHINGTON D.C. FLY-IN

The 2012 Wichita-to-Washington “Fly-In” has been scheduled for April 17-19. Staff is working to finalize the details for personal meetings with members of the Kansas Congressional Delegation as well as other offices and agencies of interest to our members and our metro area. The trip is limited to 25 participants. Please contact Pat Gallagher, 268-1157 or [pgallagher@wichitachamber.org](mailto:pgallagher@wichitachamber.org) to join the group. Cost is \$2500 including air travel, hotel and meals.

## CHAMBER POSITION ON DOWNTOWN AMBASSADOR HOTEL

At the Chairman’s Lunch yesterday, Walt Berry, 2012 Chamber Chairman of the Board, announced Wichita Metro Chamber support of the downtown Ambassador Hotel project. The chamber board of directors voted to support the upcoming ballot issue at last month’s board meeting. A [news release](#) was sent to the media yesterday afternoon.