

Bills expanding postpartum Medicaid, allowing armed educators, and banning ballot harvesting pass House

By Speaker of the House Philip Gunn

As we enter the twelfth week of the 2023 Legislative Session, the House continued to meet to consider general bills passed out of the Senate through Wednesday, March 8. Any Senate bills that did not make it off the calendar and before the House died. The House also began discussing Senate appropriations and revenue bills.



Senate Bill 2212 would extend postpartum Medicaid coverage for new mothers from 60 days to a full year. Proponents of the bill said that the extension would improve Mississippi's infant and maternal mortality rates, currently some of the highest in the United States. Opponents argued that the legislation could open the door for the full expansion of Medicaid. The bill passed the House with a vote of 92-27, was returned to the Senate, and was signed by the

Governor.

A ballot initiative process could be restored under Senate Concurrent Resolution 533. Unlike the former process, SCR 533 would allow for statutory changes or changes to the law rather than an amendment to the constitution. A House amendment was adopted, lowering the threshold of signatures needed from twelve percent of registered voters to twelve percent of the number of voters in the last gubernatorial election. The former ballot initiative process was deemed invalid by the Mississippi Supreme Court in 2021 based on the technicality that the number of Congressional districts had gone from five to four, and the language was not updated in the initiative process. SCR 533 passed the House with a vote of 77-9 and will go to conference for further revisions.

Other Senate bills that passed the House included a bill to ban ballot harvesting (SB 2358), a bill to allow armed educators in schools (SB 2079), a bill to create a Public Funds Offender Registry (SB 2420), a bill to revise the boundary lines of the Capitol Complex Improvement District (SB 2343), a bill that would

revise the penalty for motor vehicle theft (SB 2099) and the Mississippi Regional Pre-Need Disaster Clean Up Act (SB 2538).

On Thursday, March 9, the House took up the Senate's half of the state budget, which includes the Departments of Finance and Administration, Banking and Consumer Finance, Revenue, Mental Health, Corrections, and Public Safety. These were all preliminary budgets, and the bills included reverse repealers, a clause that will send the bill to conference for further discussion.

Having passed most major deadlines for floor action, the week of March 13 was spent deciding whether to concur with any changes made to House bills by the Senate or to invite conference on those bills. In conference committees, representatives and senators work together to finalize the details of each bill before they are sent to the Governor to be signed into law. The bills being sent to conference include most of the revenue and appropriations bills from the House and the Senate, which will decide the state's budget.

On Monday, March 13, Governor Tate Reeves signed House Bill

1027 into law, which designates the blueberry as the official state fruit of Mississippi. After learning that Mississippi did not have a state fruit in a civics lesson, a fourth-grade class at Mannsdale Upper Elementary School in Madison contacted Representative Jill Ford (R-Madison). As a result, the students were able to see the bill-making process from beginning to end, coming to the Capitol several times this session, including on Monday, for the bill signing.

On Thursday, March 16, the House was privileged to honor James Anderson of Holmes County with House Resolution 121. Mr. Anderson is a World War II veteran who will celebrate his 100th birthday in September. He was joined by family, friends, and the House Military Affairs Committee as he was presented the resolution on the House floor.

In the final weeks, as the session begins to wind down, legislators will spend much of their time in conference committees ironing out the final details of bills sent to the conference. These conference committees will then have to file the reports before the end of the session.

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