Transportation secretary hiring reform advances – SB4

FRANKFORT – A bill that would pave the way to changes in how Kentucky hires transportation secretaries passed out of the state Senate today.

“We need a transportation policymaking process that is transparent and accountable,” said Sen. Jimmy Higdon, R-Lebanon, who sponsored the measure, known as Senate Bill 4. “This bill incorporates ideas from Florida, South Carolina, Virginia and other states.”

He said at the core of SB 4 would be the establishment of the Kentucky Transportation Board. The board would be responsible for submitting a list of transportation secretary candidates from which the governor would have to choose. The governor’s choice would also have to be confirmed by the Senate.

Higdon said the approach would be similar to how the Kentucky Economic Development Partnership Board has selected the state economic development secretary since the General Assembly passed legislation to reform that cabinet in 1992.

Senate Transportation Committee Chair Ernie Harris, R-Prospect, stood in support of SB 4. “I believe this bill does the best we possibly can to take the politics out of roads and the funding of them,” he said while referencing previous testimony concerning how governors have handed out road projects as political favors.

Senate President Robert Stivers, R-Manchester, also stood in support of SB 4. He said governors have “politicized and weaponized” transportation projects for decades.

“Every administration I ever served under used this cabinet to do things that were totally outside of process and policy and purely political,” he said. Stivers added that Kentucky is one of only nine states where the governor can currently appoint the leader of the transportation department with no legislative involvement.

Democratic Floor Leader Morgan McGarvey, D-Louisville, stood in opposition of SB 4. He said the economic development board wasn’t a good comparison because the sitting governor is the chair and a voting member of the board.

“This isn’t a road map to transparency and accountability,” McGarvey said of SB 4. “It is a road map to confusion with side trips to delay and conflict. We know why we are doing it. We are here in the early days of a new administration as the General Assembly attempts to take power from this governor.”

SB 4 states one of the transportation board’s first responsibilities will be to begin the process for the selection of a cabinet secretary. The current transportation secretary could be considered for the job but wouldn’t be guaranteed a re-appointment.

Higdon said the board would also have several duties as related to the development of the state’s six-year road plan. SB 4 would codify a process already in place to use traffic data and other objective measurements to prioritize road projects being considered for funding in the state highway plan. Higdon
emphasized that the bill would not change legislators’ role in the final selection of road projects and the appropriation of funds.

The board would consist of nine voting members appointed by the governor from nominations submitted from the state’s League of Cities, Association of Counties and Chamber of Commerce. To ensure each organization is represented equally on the board, the governor would have to appoint three nominees from each of the organizations.

Sen. Gerald A. Neal, D-Louisville, voted against SB 4 but did successfully introduce an amendment, known as Senate Floor Amendment 2, that would require board membership to reflect gender and racial diversity.

SB 4 passed by a 25-8 vote. It now goes to the House of Representatives for further consideration.

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