

The 2021 legislative long session began on Wednesday, January 13 with a ceremonial session where legislators were sworn in and committee chairmanships were made official. They adjourned at the end of the day and will return on Wednesday, January 27 to begin the business of the long session.

It is expected that the legislature will spend a good amount of time working on COVID-related issues. As of now, in-person sessions and committee meetings are planned. There have been no guidelines given yet about visitors to the building other than the required temperature checks upon entering the buildings.

COVID-19

Legislative leadership has prioritized COVID as the major issue that needs to be addressed this session. Senate President Phil Berger recently said that almost everything else that they do will play off of what the situation is at the moment with the virus. He and House Speaker Tim Moore said that before they can really get into other issues, they need to understand the COVID relief package that was recently passed by the federal government. They are working to get a better understanding of what the package requires for them to distribute funds or implement new programs. Moore and Berger also stressed that they want to ensure that vaccines are getting to North Carolinians in a timely manner.

Budget

As you may remember, there was no omnibus budget bill passed in 2019 (or 2020) because the legislature and governor were unable to come to an agreement on Medicaid expansion, leaving the legislature to pass a series of “mini-budgets.” Both sides have voiced their hope to work together this year to pass a budget bill. It was predicted last year to the state would face a \$2 billion shortfall in revenue due to COVID. However, the state now has more than \$4 billion in unspent revenue as a result of increased tax collections and two years without a formal budget bill, which meant the state’s spending has been frozen at the 2018 level while tax and other revenues have increased substantially. Both Speaker Moore and Senator Berger have said that this surplus will allow the legislature to avoid cuts to education, while some Democrats are calling for the money to be used as COVID recovery package.

Healthcare

A major issue for this session will be Medicaid. While Democrats continue to push for Medicaid expansion, Republicans believe that the state’s Medicaid transformation transition from fee-for-service to managed care, which is set to go live in July of this year, should be the focus right now. They believe that the state needs to prove that it can handle Medicaid transformation before even discussing putting another burden on the system.

It is also expected that telehealth will be a big topic this session as a result of its higher utilization rate during the pandemic and its ability to provide access to care for rural communities especially.

Certificate of Need laws will also be a topic of discussion once again this year. Some legislators intend to continue their attempt at repealing, or at least reforming, these laws.

Education

Teacher salary increases remain a top priority of legislative leadership, and the revenue surplus makes it more likely that we will see some increases in the legislature's proposed budget bill.

Broadband expansion is also a priority, especially now that virtual learning due to the pandemic has highlighted the need for more equitable access to broadband in rural areas. The governor and legislative leadership have agreed on \$30 million in broadband expansion funding to be appropriated this session.

Redistricting

The Republican-led legislature will draw new state House and Senate and congressional districts this year based on data from the new census that should be released this spring. It is expected that the census will lead to an extra seat in Congress.

While there have been calls for an independent redistricting committee, Senator Berger has pushed back on that, saying that he doesn't know how you can be successful in "getting politics out of politics."