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Centerpiece

This week, *GCSIntel* sat down with Rep. Mark Meadows (D-East Lansing), who serves as chair of the House Judiciary Committee, to talk to him about the Judiciary Committee's docket and what he sees coming up.

Meadows has also played a role in legislation working on funding for public employee retiree health care and proposed some structural reforms in how the state generates its fiscal support.

The following are excerpts from that conversation.

Q. Our first question is about the House Judiciary Committee. What are some of the issues that are at the top of your agenda?

A. That's a big question, and I'll tell you why -- I think we either have or have had over 400 bills in the committee -- it's a big task.

I try to schedule out the committees three months in advance. I don't think I'm there quite yet. I haven't started the schedule into January yet. I look at each bill and try to determine whether it has a chance of going anywhere or whether it's something that's directed toward a big-picture issue or just somebody's personal complaint of some kind.

We're going to try to finish out juvenile parole reforms we started and we've had extensive hearings on -- those are coming up in December. We also have the juvenile competency package.

Q. What is the juvenile competency package about?

A. It's about determining the competency of juveniles and the different standards that we have in place for adults at this time. The belief is, and many studies suggest, that there may be juveniles who end up incarcerated or in the system largely because they don't get the same competency review that an adult does. They may actually be better off in a system that provides some mental health counseling or treatment.

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So, there is a series of bills, I think 10 in the package, that require that [same kind of] evaluation under certain circumstances and how it's done, and it would be an improvement in the way we administer justice in the State of Michigan.

There are several packages like that, and I'd like to at least get those done and out on the floor so we can schedule them for votes some time in the future.

Some of the things we're looking at are what we did last session but were unsuccessful in either getting out of the House or getting the Senate to take it up. So, I might want to look at those, and maybe if we can get them done earlier we can work the deal. Largely, those are bills that may be bipartisan or where we've seen a bipartisan support for them.

You may remember the prisoner ID package from last session, where we get Corrections to do some research so that we can get drivers licenses and things like that for prisoners as they are released because sometimes that prevents them from getting a job. That's a bipartisan package that is going to run through the committee in December as well.

Q. You've been a leader in the reform for long-term health care and its impact on public employee retirees. Have you been able to get anywhere with that this session?

A. Yes, we passed that out. Actually, it was one of the first packages we passed out of committee. That's been over in the Senate and last week [Sen.] Mark Jansen (R-Grand Rapids) took up three of the bills. In the Senate they combined two of the bills that were out there regarding counties' abilities to create and fund a VEBA type trust to provide for retiree health care and that bill passed out of their committee, and [Rep.] Rick Hammel (D-Flushing) had a bill that created the trust at the state level for our retirees, and that bill passed out of their committee. They haven't taken up the rest of the package, and I'm not sure when they're going to do that.

But they have started to take it up, and I think we'll have an opportunity to get those bills finished this session. There's a good example of what I was talking about earlier because we did pass them in the House last session but they expired, and this session we passed them right away.

Q. What are your thoughts about funding some of the things that didn't get funded in the budget such as education, promise grants and revenue sharing -- what are the chances of getting some of these priorities funded?

A. I do actually have a belief that we'll get them funded. The Senate expressed a willingness to look at the EITC [Earned Income Tax Credit] -- more than we did -- at least in terms of the volume of how they hacked it -- they eliminated it. That was \$160 million that was made available in their budget. They just don't have the same priorities that we do.

As you know, most of that money was pushed toward the reduction of the MBT surcharge, and a few dollars were shifted toward education. We did a Treasury analysis of the bills and if my memory is correct, we found it cost us \$78 million -- so it wasn't very good math on the part of the Senate.

We had a package of potential revenue streams that included a reduction in the value of tax expenditures or credits that were available in the MBT to businesses and a reduction in the EITC, but not the elimination of it, and a reduction in the personal exemption because it's going to go up to \$3,600 per person, and we suggested we not make that increase and keep it at \$3,500. You start to add all those things up and other things out there and you're looking at about \$350 million.

So, we found real money that we thought would be appropriate and discussed it with them and what they came back with was really only one piece of what we had suggested and that was taking a look at the EITC.

GCSEye On The Capitol

Lt. Gov. Questions Legislature's Ability

Lt. Gov. John Cherry on Thursday of this week questioned the ability of the Legislature to enact comprehensive tax reform that many groups and fiscal analysts are warning the state must look at or face continued dire fiscal distress.

"I'm not convinced the Legislature is capable of dealing with it," Cherry said when asked about the odds that lawmakers could accomplish government or tax reform before the political environment becomes toxic due to the 2010 political races. "I think the most valuable route if we're serious about it, is going with some ballot question."

Cherry added that any ballot proposal that comes out of the Legislature would be viewed by voters who are "pretty jaundiced" towards Lansing. Cherry added the Legislature has had the opportunity to put tax reform options on the ballot in 2007 and 2008 and that "in that context maybe they [legislators] are more risk adverse than they used to be."

The failure of the Legislature to address the state's "structural issues" is due to term limits Cherry said. On that point, he added term limits don't need to be eliminated but lengthened.

Michigan Senate Drop Kicks E.O. On DEQ/DNR Combo

The Michigan Senate on Thursday expressed its discontent over an Executive Order issued earlier this fall by Gov. Jennifer Granholm that would combine the state's Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and Department of Natural Resources (DNR). That Order also would remove from the state's Agriculture Commission the power to appoint the Agriculture Director.

The Senate expressed its discontent by passing Senate Concurrent Resolution 23, sponsored by Sen. Michelle McManus (R-Lake Leelanau), and Senate Concurrent Resolution 24, sponsored by Sen. Wayne Kuipers (R-Holland), on party-line votes. Earlier in the week, Granholm's administration expressed an openness to "tweaking" the Executive Order although talks on that front are ongoing.

Following the Senate's vote, Senate Majority Floor Leader Alan Cropsey (R-DeWitt) moved to reconsider the vote - thereby keeping the resolutions on the Senate floor for now.

Rooney: NRCC Recruited Me In 7th

Former Marine Maj. Brian Rooney said the National Republican Campaign Committee (NRCC) recruited him to run in the 7th Congressional District, making for an interesting GOP primary against former U.S. Rep. Tim Walberg (R-Tipton).

"Yeah, they did, actually. (The NRCC) called me up," Rooney said.

Rooney, an attorney with the conservative Christian Thomas More Law Center, threw his hat in the ring last week for the seat held by freshman U.S. Rep. Mark Schauer (D-Battle Creek). *MIRS* reported in August that Rooney, a father of three from Dexter, was weighing a run. In the primary, he and Walberg are likely to face real estate executive Marvin Carlson and possibly Bill Martin, CEO of the Michigan Association of Realtors.

Michigan Factoid:

Michigan State University has the largest single campus student body of any Michigan university. It is the largest institution of higher learning in the state and one of the largest universities in the country.

— *50states.com*

Schauer is one of the NRCC's top targets, as he only beat Walberg by 2.3 percent in 2008, underperforming against President Barack Obama's numbers in the district. It's also been a strong Republican district in the past, with former U.S. Reps. Joe Schwarz (R-Battle Creek) and Nick Smith (R-Addison) both taking around 60 percent of the vote. But Schauer has proven a formidable fundraiser, with almost \$1 million in the bank as of the third quarter.

The Week Ahead

Lansing will be relatively quiet as the Legislature takes a brief break for the opening of deer season. Next week, the House and Senate will be in session on Wednesday.

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