



Western Dakota Energy Association
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[Geoff Simon](#), Executive Director



As the first full week of the 2019 Legislature arrived, there were voices in the halls grumbling about the cold and wind outside. It was most definitely a chilly week, but statistically speaking the temperatures were close to, or even slightly above normal for early January in Bismarck. The pace of activity inside the Capitol helped to heat things up. By week's end, legislators had introduced 649 bills and 25 concurrent resolutions, with even more to come. Longtime observers speculated the total could approach 1,000 before bill filing deadlines arrive Monday for House members and January 21 for members of the North Dakota Senate.

Excitement among WDEA members quickened as word was received of a firm date and time for the first committee hearing on [HB 1066](#), infrastructure funding legislation dubbed "Operation Prairie Dog" by its primary architect, Senator Rich Wardner, R-Dickinson. The hearing will be held before the House Finance and Taxation Committee on Tuesday, January 15, at 10:00 a.m., in the Brynhild Haugland Room. The legislation would provide funding through the gross production tax (GPT) distribution formula to Hub Cities and other oil-impacted communities, as well as establish infrastructure grant "buckets" for non-oil producing cities, counties and townships. Two separate buckets, one for cities and the other for counties and townships, would each fill with \$115 million to be doled out as infrastructure grants. Click [here](#) to see projected amounts cities would receive, and [here](#) for estimated totals for North Dakota counties. WDEA has been working with the ND Association of Counties and the ND League of Cities to manage the overwhelming interest among North Dakota cities and counties to provide testimony in support of the legislation. The committee room will almost certainly be standing room only when the meeting begins on Tuesday.

WDEA provided supporting testimony on several bills this week. Among them was [HB 1020](#) which would provide funding in the next biennium for the Upper Great Plains Transportation Institute. UPGTI's Biennial County Road and Bridge Funding Needs Study is an important component of HB 1066. Dollars that would be allocated to counties and townships in the legislation are based on the needs assessment, which allows the legislature to target infrastructure dollars to areas where they are needed most. The needs assessment was last funded by the 2015 Legislature, so it is time to update the data. UGPTI also provides a Road Asset Management System, which is an important tool used by county highway departments to identify the need for, and timing of road maintenance.

The Senate this week unanimously approved [SB 2042](#) which eliminates an annual budget report the legislature required of counties and schools in the oil-producing region. They have been required to report amounts of GPT revenue they receive, along with the manner and purpose for which the funds were expended. Testimony during the interim indicated that neither the Tax Department nor Legislative Council had received public requests for the reports.

The Senate is considering [SB 2099](#) introduced on behalf of the Bank of North Dakota to remove a preference for oil counties in a medical facility loan program. The \$50 million loan pool was created by the 2013 Legislature to address the demand for expanded medical facilities caused by the surge in oil activity. The fund provided 1% loans of \$10 million or more to hospitals in Bowman, Dickinson and Watford City, as well a \$6.5 million loan to the Tioga Medical Center and a nearly \$1.7 million to the Mountrail County Medical Center in Stanley. The bill will be on the Senate floor Monday.

School construction funding is among WDEA's top priorities this session. The need was dramatized with the narrow defeat this week of a \$60 million bond issue in Williston. Superintendents in western districts participated in a telephone conference this week with chairs of the Senate and House Education Committees to review various measures that could help address funding needs. The Senate committee will hear two bills Tuesday introduced by Sen. David Rust, R-Tioga. They are [SB 2160](#), which would allow districts to keep more of the revenue they receive through the GPT distribution formula, and [SB 2161](#), which would establish a rapid enrollment school construction grant fund.

Numerous bills of interest to WDEA members were introduced this week. Among them is [HB 1264](#) which would raise speed limits in North Dakota, [HB 1301](#) which would raise the gas tax 7¢ per gallon, and [HB 1352](#) which would establish a motor vehicle ferry across Lake Sakakawea to connect the cities of Twin Buttes and Parshall.

To check bill status or look up legislators, click [here](#) for the home page of the 66th Regular Legislative Assembly.