

Chamber groups ready to revive reform agenda

Changes in collective bargaining and education still sought after SB 5 rebuke

By **JAY MILLER**

The voter rejection of state Issue 2 was a big disappointment for the state's major business groups. But they already are planning on which measures they will be pushing in the months ahead as the Republican-dominated Legislature regroups.

Education reform is likely to be at the top of the list.

"Our greatest priority still is teacher seniority and teacher accountability measures that we think are absolutely critical for the Cleveland school system and other school systems," Joe Roman, president of Greater Cleveland Partnership, said. "We were involved in (those issues) before they turned into Senate Bill 5 and Issue 2, and we're going to get right back to it."

Leaders of GCP, the other regional chambers of commerce around the state and the Ohio Chamber of Commerce will be meeting this week to map a unified legislative strategy, said Carol Caruso, GCP's senior vice president for advocacy.

The business groups banded together last year as the state budget crisis loomed and last December issued a report, "Redesigning Ohio," that was described as a road map for long-term change of government and taxation in the state at a time of unprecedented fiscal crisis.

Ms. Caruso said she expects she and her colleagues will identify a number of issues to pursue with the General Assembly.

"There are several things the business community cares an awful lot about," she said. "It's just, how do you do it and when do you do it? We just hope the momentum continues because the state just cannot afford" the current level of spending.

No time to retreat 'too much'

Many of the chamber groups' recommendations for public employment reforms ended up in Senate Bill 5, which, as Issue 2, was resoundingly defeated 61% to 39% last Tuesday, Nov. 8. SB 5 would have limited the collective bargaining rights of state and local public employees, including teachers, police officers and firefighters. It would have expanded a no-strike law to all 360,000 public employees in the state and required them to pay at least 15% of the cost of their health care benefits and 10% of their pension costs.

Ms. Caruso said she hopes the business groups can move the Legislature to repackage some of those elements into new legislation.

"I just think that this is not the time to retreat too much," she said. "But obviously, the political realities are something we have to be very much aware of."

Ms. Caruso said she is encouraged about the prospects of making some headway on the reforms the chambers have identified because polling on Issue 2 showed support for some of the measures in SB 5.

One of those key issues that voters appeared to support is changing state law to give school districts more flexibility in staffing. Current state law requires districts to adhere to a strict seniority system that protected older teachers and forced districts to lay off talented younger faculty.

Sizing up the bites

Likewise, Ms. Caruso said she hopes the Legislature will renew the effort to reduce what she described as "the disparity between what private and public sector people pay in terms of health insurance and retirement.

"There was a lot of support for looking into that as well," she said.

The groups may press lawmakers for ways to encourage communities and school districts to cut costs by collaborating on services or merging.

"We will continue to pursue everything in "Redesigning Ohio,"" she said. "It's just a matter of what kind of a bite you take and the timing."

She said she's had a good reception from some legislators on education issues.

Mike Dittoe, director of communications for Ohio House Speaker Bill Batchelder, wasn't ready to talk about specifics, but he did suggest that parts of SB 5 could be revived.

"The governor and the speaker are saying they are going to take a breather and recalibrate and see what we need to do next," he said. "If we do take up portions of SB 5, it certainly is not going to be something we take lightly."