

# Week seven of the 2026 Legislative Session

As we've reached the halfway point of the 2026 Legislative Session, I want to provide a clear update on where things stand and what Kentuckians can expect in the weeks ahead.

With over 30 legislative days complete of the required 60, the Senate has remained focused on steady, deliberate progress. At this stage of the session, nine of the Senate Majority's 10 top-priority bills passed the Senate.

That progress reflects months of preparation during the interim and careful consideration during committee and floor debate.

Before I begin, I have to express what a blessing it was to take part in my final Military Kids Day as your state Senator. Despite construction on our state Capitol Building, the event was a huge success thanks to the Kentucky National Guard, military families, our Senate clerk, my legislative assistant, and so many others who are involved and will remain involved beyond my time in Frankfort. It was a joy to watch the kids enjoy static displays on the Capitol campus, play with the aviation museum's flight simulators, hear from guest speakers and participate in the Capitol scavenger hunt. You can find a video clip of the day's events by going to the KY Senate Republicans YouTube Channel.

State budget update

I have heard from many of you regarding the early budget bill filed in the state House of Representatives and the budget process more broadly. I understand these discussions affect real families, and I appreciate those who have taken the time to share their concerns.

It is important to clarify where we currently stand.

The state budget traditionally originates in the House of Representatives. The early House proposal has not yet passed that chamber and remains sub-

ject to committee revisions and floor amendments before reaching the Senate. The measure remains in its earliest stages.

To be clear: no final budget decisions have been made.

When the House delivers a proposed budget to the Senate, we will carefully review the proposal, evaluate any changes and make revisions where necessary. That is the Senate's constitutional responsibility, and we take it seriously.

Questions surrounding health insurance costs, benefit stability and long-term affordability deserve thoughtful review. Those issues require discipline, transparency and careful analysis. In fulfilling the Senate's role in the budget process, our guiding principles remain clear; we will maintain a structurally balanced budget, ensuring recurring revenues support recurring expenses, exercise discipline with one-time dollars and avoid short-term budgeting approaches that create long-term instability and make thoughtful, transparent decisions that protect both taxpayers and public employees.

There is considerable work ahead before a final budget is enacted, and I will continue keeping you informed as the process moves forward.

With that, I want to update you on several bills making progress this week.

I'm happy to inform you that the first bill of the legislative session to be signed by the governor and become law is Senate Bill (SB) 172. This bill I mentioned last week, upon its Senate approval. It provides an additional tool to the Kentucky Public Service Commission to address energy affordability challenges. Under the bill, upon a utility company's request, the PSC could prevent sudden spikes in utility bills due to fuel surcharges by spreading the costs over time. I'm

happy to see this bipartisan measure become law.

A number of bills passed the Senate chamber, some of which I sponsored.

As sponsor of SB 70, and in my role as chair of the Public Pension Oversight Board (PPOB), I brought forward a measure this week to strengthen oversight of Kentucky's public retirement systems. SB 70 makes appointment adjustments to PPOB to ensure that members have direct involvement in pension policy and relevant experience in retirement plan management. The bill adds the chair or vice chair of the Senate State and Local Government Committee and the House State Government Committee, along with the state treasurer or designee. It also allows appointing authorities to select former elected officials with pension expertise to serve. These changes strengthen accountability and improve institutional knowledge on the board. Our educators, state workers and retirees depend on us to protect the integrity of their retirement systems, and thoughtful oversight is essential to that responsibility.

As PPOB chair, I also sponsored SB 127 to address how annual leave is treated within the Teachers' Retirement System. This bill does not eliminate annual leave. It defines responsibility for the actuarial costs associated with accumulated leave and limits the retirement system's long-term exposure.

I also sponsored SB 80, a proposed constitutional amendment to restore voting rights.

I've had the pleasure of working with the primary co-sponsor of my bill, Sen. Keturah Herron of Louisville, on our joint efforts to pass this measure. The Senate passed identical legislation in 2020 before the session was cut short by the COVID-19 pandemic. SB 80 provides clarity following the 2019 executive order on voting rights restoration by establishing a constitutional

framework. Under this amendment, most individuals would have their voting rights automatically restored upon completion of their sentence and probation, with exceptions for election fraud, violent felony offenses, felony sexual offenses and crimes against a child.

The amendment preserves the governor's constitutional authority while providing clear statutory guidance to county clerks and the courts. It also removes outdated language from the constitution and replaces it with appropriate terminology.

This proposal allows the people of Kentucky to decide the issue directly at the ballot box.

## ADDITIONAL BILLS PASSED IN WEEK SEVEN

SB 9 streamlines regulations and creates new financing tools to support housing construction and redevelopment across Kentucky. I was proud to serve on the Kentucky Housing Task Force and be a co-sponsor of this measure. The bill is a product of the task force's work. By giving local communities greater flexibility to plan and fund growth, the bill aims to increase housing supply, strengthen local economies, and help more Kentuckians find homes they can afford.

SB 39 is another bill I co-sponsored. The measure gives private landowners greater flexibility to use and manage lakes and ponds on their own property by allowing them to stock and fish without certain state limits on size, creel or methods. It also allows landowners to extend those privileges to others through written or electronic permission, while maintaining safeguards to prevent misuse and protect public waters. The measure clarifies stocking rules, including for largemouth bass, and clearly defines what qualifies as a private lake or pond.

SB 47 expands state death benefits and tuition

waivers to include search and rescue personnel who lose their lives while performing official emergency operations. This measure ensures families of these dedicated volunteers and professionals receive the same support as other emergency responders, recognizing their service and sacrifice.

SB 69 establishes an autism spectrum disorder trust fund and allows taxpayers to voluntarily contribute a portion of their state income tax refund to support autism research, services and workforce development. This effort will help strengthen resources for individuals and families across the autism spectrum and expand access to meaningful support statewide.

SB 104 establishes a 25-foot safety zone around first responders while they are performing official duties and creates penalties for individuals who intentionally interfere, threaten or harass emergency personnel. The measure, known as the HALO Act, is designed to protect those who serve on the front lines while preserving constitutional rights to observe and record.

SB 85 allows retirement benefits from Kentucky's public pension systems to be directed into a special needs trust for a disabled beneficiary. This change gives families greater peace of mind by protecting long-term care needs while preserving eligibility for Medicaid and other support services.

SB 141 modernizes Kentucky's public notice laws by clarifying publication requirements, updating timelines, expanding digital access and helping control taxpayer costs. The bill strengthens transparency while making it easier for citizens to stay informed about decisions that affect their communities.

SB 152 strengthens school leadership and accountability by clarifying that principals have final decision-making authority while maintaining structured input from teachers

and parents through advisory councils. The goal is to support strong, effective leadership that helps schools better serve students and families.

SB 154 strengthens Kentucky's voter ID law by updating the list of documents that may be used to verify identity when casting a ballot. The measure focuses on ensuring secure and reliable identification while maintaining confidence in the election process.

SB 159 strengthens Kentucky's response to missing persons cases by requiring timely reporting and improved coordination between state and federal databases. The bill helps ensure information is shared quickly, increasing the likelihood that missing individuals are located and families receive answers.

Senate Joint Resolution 74 directs the development of a statewide fiscal map of substance use disorder programs and funding. This effort will improve transparency, coordination and accountability as Kentucky continues investing in prevention, treatment and recovery services to support individuals, families and communities.

Each of these bills now advances to the House for further consideration.

As we enter the second half of the session, our focus remains on steady progress and responsible governance. Legislative deadlines are approaching, committees continue to meet daily, and collaboration between chambers will intensify.

Your engagement in this process matters. Good-faith communication strengthens public policy, and I encourage you to continue sharing your thoughts as the legislation advances.

If you have questions or concerns, I'm just a call or an email away. You can reach my office at 502-564-8100 or email me at [Jimmy.Higdon@kylegislature.gov](mailto:Jimmy.Higdon@kylegislature.gov).



JIMMY HIGDON

## The Assent of Roy McCorkle

Last time, we touched upon the frequently reported phenomenon known as terminal lucidity. As the name implies, terminal lucidity occurs in patients who have long since become catatonic due to disease or trauma affecting brain function. Many patients, it continues to be reported, experience brief moments of clarity of thought and communicate with incredible coherence to those around them, not long before dying. Deathbed visions are another end-of-life phenomenon in which patients have and act upon visions of people not physically present. Over and over again, hospice caregivers report patients experiencing deathbed visions, which are confirmed by multiple studies from around the world, indicating that about 40 percent of families report a loved one as having had an end-of-life experience.

Scientific explanations are less than helpful at explaining the phenomena, obviously, because there is no survival benefit afforded the species by dying with a vision of one's mother as opposed to dying in an unconscious state of being. On naturalism, the latter would seem

to be optimal. But that is not what is often reported. And what is reported is nothing short of astounding, even coming from the

tiny little West Texas town of Coleman.

In June of 2021, Billy McCorkle was diagnosed with cancer; on the 20th day of February 2023, he passed away. Judy McCorkle, his wife of 48 years, would recall that some days earlier, he had said that he hated leaving her, and she had told him that when he got ready, she would be okay and that he could go on to heaven. A few days later, growing weaker and weaker, no one was sure if he would pass away that night or not. As Judy and her granddaughter sat vigil over him in their bedroom, Billy kept looking at the window. Eventually, in a calm voice, he said, "Mama's here," and then he said, "Daddy." Billy never said another word but continued to fixate on the bedroom window. Soon his breathing became more shallow, and the decision was made to call the hospice nurse. When the nurse arrived, she noticed he was looking intently at the window. She said she had often seen patients have these experiences and that he was definitely looking at someone. When she asked

him who he was looking at, he did not answer but just kept looking at the window. The nurse reported that his vital signs were good, telling the family to call her back if things changed, which they soon did.

As time drew ever closer, Judy would say that she was holding Billy's hand when, at once, "his eyes got big, and he looked to be in awe. I don't know what he saw, but he looked up in awe, and I said, 'You can go on with your Mama and Daddy; I'll be fine; you can go on.' And he took his hand out of my hand and reached up, and he passed away." At first, she thought he was reaching up to his Mother and Daddy, but the expression of awe on his face and the look in his eye told a different story. Those in the room are convinced that on that Monday morning in February, inescapably struck with holy and reverent awe and a sense of incredible, joyful peace,

Billy Roy McCorkle took his hand out of his wife's hand and took hold of the hand of Jesus.

Undoubtedly, the unbeliever will cry foul; after all, we are talking about Jesus Christ. Scientists argue that there are only two possible causes of what Billy experienced. First, it could be physiological changes occurring just before death, such as

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## The most important thing in the world

I poked my head into a colleague's office door at Campbellsville University. Ray had known about my brother since his ALS diagnosis two years ago. I let him know Mark had passed.

Ray was at his desk when I told him, mid-task, mid-day, in the ordinary flow of work. What he did next has stayed with me ever since. He stopped.

He stood up and embraced me. Then he walked to two chairs in the corner of his office, settled into one, and gestured to the other. When I sat down, he asked, simply and without hurry: "How are you doing?"

That was all. But it was everything.

Ray had, without using the term, practiced something close to what Jewish tradition calls sitting shiva.

In the days following a death, in the Jewish faith, family and friends come to comfort mourners, not to fix or explain or fill the silence with noise, but to be present. Visitors are taught not to speak first — to wait until the mourner speaks, to follow their lead, to let grief set the pace. It is a countercultural act in any age, and perhaps especially in ours.

We are not good at sitting still with sorrow. We rush to comfort, perhaps with a condolence mes-

sage, a bereavement card, or even a casserole dropped at the door. Shiva asks something harder of us: to remain.

Ray remained. And in doing so, he offered me a kind of grace I did not know I needed.

The visit was short. I was on my way in less than fifteen minutes, but Ray would have been willing to sit the afternoon with me had I needed it.

Lent is a season of discipline. We know its familiar rhythms — the giving up of chocolate or social media, the adding of prayer or fasting, the slow march of forty days toward the Cross and the empty tomb. These are good and ancient practices, and they shape us in ways we may not fully understand until much later.

But there is another discipline worth considering this Lent, one that costs us something different: the discipline of stopping, turning toward another person, and truly listening.

In his book, *How to Know a Person, The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*, David Brooks quotes author and therapist, Mary Pipher, who once told Brooks, "To be able to understand people and be present for them in their experience—that's the most important thing in the world."

It is not easy listening to people. It's harder than giving up dessert. It requires that we lay down our own agendas, our discomfort with grief, and our impulse to solve what cannot be solved. It asks us to trust that presence itself is a gift.

When Jesus heard of his friend Lazarus' death, he traveled a two-day journey to his home, presumably to sit shiva. When Jesus and his disciples arrived, Lazarus had already been dead for four days. The time of sitting shiva was usually seven days. The Hebrew word, shiva, means "seven." Jesus intentionally waited two days before making the journey, arriving to sit shiva when the family had already been four days into it. But they knew Jesus was there for them. They didn't have a clue what He was about to do for Lazarus, the miracle that prompted the religious authorities to go after Him in full force.

But even in that, isn't the Cross the ultimate act of remaining? Christ did not rush past human suffering. He entered it. He listened not only to the Father but to the hurting ones he encountered on his journey to the Cross.

This Lent, we might practice, in our small and ordinary ways, doing the same.

As Pipher said, "It's the most important thing in the world."



DAVID WHITLOCK