

Wyo Leg's Dems Fight For Budget Priorities

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Wyoming Legislature's Democrats fight for a budget that supports workers, communities, and natural landscapes

JACKSON – As the Wyoming Legislature begins the second week of its 2024 session and lawmakers prepare for two rounds of debate over budget amendments, the Democrats' focus lies with Wyoming's hardworking families, supporting local communities, and the shared duty to protect our natural landscapes.

Democratic lawmakers are responsible for several key components of the budget bill that will be up for debate in both chambers on Monday and Wednesday, and Democrats plan to propose further amendments from the floor.

"The state budget is a reflection of the shared values of the people who elected us," Rep. Trey Sherwood (D-Laramie), said. "Democrats have been working for months to make sure that this budget gives taxpayers their money back in the form of programs and services they need most."

Workforce housing, increasing teacher pay, mental health and suicide prevention, protection against invasive species, family planning, and the future of Grand Teton National Park are all

addressed in budget line items that Democrats will rally behind in the coming week.

Economy and workers

The lack of housing that residents can afford has become a major issue in communities across the state, hurting Wyoming employers, workers, and local economies all at once.

Rep. Sherwood, a member of the Legislature's Joint Appropriations Committee, championed a redesign of a Wyoming Office of State Lands and Investments grant program to allow local governments to apply for funds for land acquisition and the construction of infrastructure to support workforce housing projects.

The revamped \$5 million grant program will allow Wyoming towns and counties to apply for funds to address their critical needs for workforce housing and ensure their local economies can grow.

Alongside housing, childcare is becoming a bigger problem for Wyoming's workforce, with few affordable options in most places. Rep. Karlee Provenza (D-Laramie) plans to bring an amendment to create a program similar to the Hathaway Scholarship that will help working families afford childcare. Rep. Provenza's proposed trust fund would generate enough investment income to effectively close the gap between low-income families, who already qualify for federal childcare assistance, and families that pay for private care.

Together, the Wyoming Legislature's Democrats will support an increase for K-12 teacher pay to address inflation and higher costs of living, which is currently included in the proposed budget. They also plan to back a recruitment and retention program for the Department of Corrections to employ adequate numbers of prison guards, additional support for the Wyoming

Women's Business Center, and additional staff for the agency that certifies law enforcement officers.

Caring communities

Wyoming Democrats believe that we must invest in the success of the next generation for our communities to thrive.

Rep. Ken Chestek (D-Laramie) will propose a budget amendment that would fund a summer nutrition program for needy kids, ensuring that no Wyoming children go hungry during the months they do not have access to school lunch.

With Rep. Chestek's amendment, Wyoming would receive a four-to-one match in federal funds for the program.

"There are some Wyoming communities that have summer lunch programs for kids suffering from food insecurity, but there are more than half-dozen counties that don't have them at all," Chestek said. "We need to do a better job than that at looking out for our neighbors, especially while the Legislature is putting hundreds of millions of dollars into our Rainy Day account. If you're a hungry kid, it's already raining pretty hard."

Mental health and suicide prevention continue to be bipartisan priorities, and Democrats will join their colleagues in the Republican Party's Wyoming Caucus to support solutions. This includes funding for the state's new "988" suicide hotline, a mental wellness center at the University of Wyoming, as well as increased mental health staff for children in the state's Boys and Girls Schools.

Duty to protect our natural landscapes

One unusual item in the proposed budget this year is a section that would secure the fate of the controversial "Kelly Parcel"

of state land within Grand Teton National Park.

Sen. Mike Gierau (D-Jackson), who serves on the Joint Appropriations Committee, led the creation of a clause in the budget bill that would effectively pre-authorize the sale of the parcel to Grand Teton National Park for \$100 million. It specifies that funds from the sale would go to Wyoming public schools.

“Before the state and the National Park can enter into any sort of agreement, the Legislature needs to authorize the sale, and that’s what this does,” Gierau said. “This will take us one step closer to keeping a section of unique, pristine land out of the hands of private developers and protect it for generations of Wyomingites and Americans to come.”

The sale of the land as outlined in the budget would generate investment returns providing an estimated \$5 million each year for Wyoming K-12 schools.

Wyoming Democrats have also played key roles in budget proposals that will improve air and water quality monitoring and increase resources to mitigate invasive species.

“We’re falling behind in the fight against invasive species,” Rep. Liz Storer (D-Jackson) said. “It’s really a no-brainer to invest in the fight against these invasive grasses that harm wildlife and agriculture and worsen wildfires. Our natural landscapes are some of what Wyomingites love most about our state, so I can’t imagine voting for a budget that doesn’t dedicate resources to protecting them.”

– End –

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