

# Caution light is burning at State Capital

By Jack Zimmerman

## Salem Scene

A caution light is burning in the State Capitol at Salem and its amber glow likely will

color the remainder of the current regular biennial session of the 60th Assembly.

A consensus in the Capitol as the session ended its sixth week indicated the pace is best described as deliberate and prudent, as opposed to anything resembling languor

or lethargy.

Lawmakers are busy. But they are wary, also. Aside from the preoccupation with determining a satisfactory tax relief program and modifying the state's costly Workers' Compensation system, few other issues have surfaced

that fall either into the substantive or publicly popular categories.

Largest bill introduced so far is a revision of the state's election laws—and it is largely a 191-page recodification of existing statutes. Bill production appears to be lagging

significantly behind previous recent sessions and the total of all measures introduced as of Feb. 15 is 511 fewer than at the same time last session.

At the end of the sixth week in 1977 the Senate had introduced 744 measures and the House had introduced 901.

This year the Senate has introduced only 534 and the House an even 600.

Many observers believe the figures so far indicate lawmakers will continue to resist the temptation to match or surpass the record 2,812 total measures considered during

the 1977 session. House deadline for open introduction of bills was Feb. 5 and deadline for the Senate is Feb. 27. Introduction of additional measures after those deadlines requires special permission in both Chambers. Although such permission is

generally forthcoming, the vast bulk of subsequent legislative proposals emanates from committees.

The same people who expect fewer total measures this session are quick to explain less legislation doesn't necessarily mean a shorter session. This early in the game there are those who predict current deliberations will match or even exceed the 177 days occupied between Jan. 10 and July 5, 1977. One fairly reliable prognosticator already has predicted adjournment will occur on July 7 this year. And if that happens, the 60th Assembly will set a record for length. It would surpass by one day the 180-day session of 1973.

There are probably many reasons for the tedious progress of the session so far and the circumspection of its members.

The complexities surrounding both major issues is one. Gov. Victor Atiyeh, making good on his election campaign pledge, has delivered a tax relief plan that has been received so far with a great deal less than enthusiasm. Members of the House Revenue Committee don't appear anywhere near finding a compromise program to send to the Senate.

And the Workers' Comp situation is at least equally as complicated. Although many measures have been introduced—and more will follow—all aimed at changing the present system in one way or another, a consensus on most lies somewhere in the relatively distant future. Nearly all parties agree the system's high cost must be alleviated but are far from agreeing on who's to blame or how to achieve a less expensive method of caring for injured workers without reducing present levels of that care.

Involved are employers, labor, the insurance industry, health care people, the judiciary, lawyers and various segments of the bureaucracy dealing with the issue directly and indirectly.

Aside from the many complications standing in the way of finding solutions to tax and Workers' Compensation problems, it appears the vast majority of the 90 lawmakers serving in Salem this session are extremely aware of a public pulse that beats faster with every intrusion by government.

"It's almost as if they all suspect the folks back home are looking over their shoulder," explained one observer. "No one is anxious to make waves or do anything to create headlines."

Along this line, it appears those seeking legislative office are becoming more sophisticated and eagerly expose an incumbent's record in the course of seeking election.

The number of people visiting the Capitol to witness proceedings hasn't slackened appreciably and those calling to inquire about the status of specific legislation is comparable with last session.

And even though the 60th Assembly may agonize longer over fewer proposals, there's little reason to expect the session will be dull. The major issues are volatile and there are plenty of others that pique the public interest.

Senior citizens likely will descend on Salem en masse seeking special treatment for their utility bills. Gun control already is an issue. Land use planning problems abound. Highways continue to deteriorate and there are still lots of unresolved issues involving welfare, public education, corrections, drug use, human rights, natural resources, consumer concerns and state financing for veterans' homes and farms.

It all adds up to a situation that demands caution and perhaps a slower pace than the people have been used to in Salem. The biggest danger is that this approach might leave an impatient public even more disenchanted than before.

Unless, of course, it produces results that please nearly everybody.

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