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Tuesday, June 12, 2007, at the North Carolina General Assembly

The Associated Press

- N.C. bill would tax wire transfers from illegal immigrants
- Committee OKs broader area, stiffer penalties for cutting near billboards
- Conservation group urges action on land preservation as prices rise
- Hazardous waste recommendations clear NC Senate committee

THE BRIEF:

MONEY TRANSFERS: A House judiciary committee heard from the sponsor and opponents of a bill that would tax money wire transfers made by illegal immigrants. Rep. George Cleveland, R-Onslow, the bill sponsor, said his bill would target money being sent abroad by illegal immigrants who were unlawfully paid in cash. Cleveland's measure would impose the excise tax on money being transferred by companies such as Western Union or convenience stores that wire funds for a fee. Andy Ellen with the N.C. Retail Merchants Association said the bill would be impossible to enforce and could subject businesses to discrimination lawsuits. And Marisol Jimenez McGee, a lobbyist for the Latino advocacy group El Pueblo, said undocumented workers already pay sales tax and most have taxes and Social Security withheld from their paychecks. The committee's chairman said the bill would be discussed again by the panel.

OUTDOOR ADS: A bill to allow outdoor advertisers to cut vegetation from a larger area near their billboards - and set strict penalties for illegal cutting - cleared a Senate committee Tuesday over the objection of environmentalists and two state agencies. The measure would also raise permit fees for removing trees and brush from in front of the roadside ads. Bill Ross, secretary of Environment and Natural Resources, quoted a short Ogden Nash poem disparaging the proliferation of billboards, while Transportation Deputy Secretary Susan Coward voiced support for the fee and penalty increases but not the larger cutting zone. She also noted that the agency has tracked 50 cases of illegal cutting in front of signs since October, at a cost of about \$750,000 in damages. The bill goes before another committee before the full Senate will vote on it.

COSTLIEST LAND: As anyone who's bought property recently in North Carolina knows, the price of land is shooting up - and that's why lawmakers should act now to protect undeveloped areas, a conservation group urged. Land for Tomorrow supports a bill that would let voters decide whether to issue \$1 billion in bonds to fund the purchase and protection of farmland, forests and waterways. The organization's director, Kate Dixon, urged a House committee to act soon on the legislation, presenting a report that shows the value of land in North Carolina jumped 285 percent over the past decade. The report also notes that the highest interest rate on bonds over the decade would amount to only about a third of the increase in land prices during the period.

HAZARDOUS WASTE: Several recommendations from a task force formed after a fire at a chemical plant in Apex in October are rolling toward passage. The Senate environment committee approved a House bill incorporating many of those suggestions. The measure, designed to prevent similar disasters as Apex, would require more frequent inspections and closer monitoring of companies that store hazardous waste. The facilities also would be required to provide information to emergency workers about the types of chemicals in storage. The bill urges the state to review ways to increase financing for special state medical assistance teams that respond to waste accidents. It now goes to

the full Senate for consideration.

LESS SMOKING: University of North Carolina system campuses can expand their no-smoking areas to include 100-foot buffer zones around university buildings in a measure approved by the House Health Committee. The Senate bill also allows exemptions for the UNC Health Care System and medical buildings at East Carolina University, leaving policies there to the discretion of administrators. The measure now goes to the full House.

BRING HIM HOME: The House passed a resolution asking the Department of Defense to work to get the remains of a Marine killed in 1975 returned to Duplin County. Lance Cpl. Joseph Nelson Hargrove was captured by Khmer Rouge forces on the Koh Tang Island in Cambodia and executed in the days after he participated in an assault to free crew members of the ship Mayaguez. Hargrove's grave site was positively identified on the island in 2001. An emotional Rep. Russell Tucker, D-Duplin, and the bill's primary sponsor, urged his colleagues to back the resolution so Hargrove's "remains can rest his peace in his native soil." The measure would be sent to the Defense Secretary Robert Gates if next approved by the Senate. Hargrove's widow was in the House gallery during the debate.

MEDICAL CHANGES: The North Carolina Medical Board would be able to give more information to patients or others who have filed a complaint alleging poor treatment from a doctor in a bill that cleared the House Finance Committee. The board has been limited in what it could tell complainants when a physician has been given a verbal warning or told to receive remedial education. Board legal director Thomas Mansfield says the board will be able to explain the case and provide more details about the reasons for the disposition. The measure, which now goes to the full House, also gives the board a larger pool of people who can preside at hearings to determine whether a physician's license can be suspended.

TUESDAY'S SCORECARD:

In the House:

- S30, to make it easier for a domestic violence victim to change her name and to provide more information to applicants of protective orders about legal aid, victims' compensation and other services. Approved 113-0. Next: Returned to the Senate for concurrence motion.

- H1519, to modify the process by which county commissioners and local school board members work out funding disputes in the courts. Approved 110-0 Senate version of bill. Next: To Gov. Mike Easley for his signature.

In the Senate:

- H91, to allow citizens to register and immediately vote at one-stop sites as late as three days before an election. Removed from Tuesday's agenda and rescheduled for June 20.

- H1243, to create a procedure by which judges may decide whether to physically restrain juvenile defendants. Approved 47-0. Next: To Gov. Mike Easley for his signature.

In committees:

- H1598, to extend the Qualified Business Venture Tax Credit until Jan. 1, 2011. Favorable report from House Finance Committee. Next: To full House.

AROUND THE STATEHOUSE:

- The Senate ended its session by standing briefly to honor Sandy Basnight, wife of Senate leader Marc Basnight, D-Dare, who died Sunday. Sen. Charlie Dannelly, D-Mecklenburg, advised colleagues that a bus would leave the statehouse early Wednesday morning to take them to the funeral in Wanchese and lunch afterward, then back to Raleigh. Wednesday's Senate session was canceled, while the House plans to meet in the evening.

ON THE AGENDA:

Wednesday: The House Rules, Calendar and Operations Committee holds a public hearing on H86, which would direct legislative researchers to study municipal annexations. The meeting is at 5 p.m. in the Legislative Building auditorium on West Jones Street in Raleigh.

OVERHEARD:

"Anyone working at a Western Union I would hope has enough common sense to be able to discern who they should question and who they shouldn't." - Rep. George Cleveland, R-Onslow, discussing how employees at money transfer offices would decide which customers should be asked to show documents proving they are in the country legally.

By Gary D. Robertson and Margaret Lillard.

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