

# PRIORITY MATTERS

## Chamber's Top Legislative Policies

By Rebecca Patrick

Roads and respect are the topics set to dominate the 2016 Indiana General Assembly.

Transportation infrastructure funding and expansion of the state's civil rights law to include protection for the LGBT community headline the Indiana Chamber's list of legislative priorities for the year. While there is no way to predict the expected twist and turns of these two intricate battles, the Chamber will be strongly advocating passage of substantial measures for both.

The organization proposes an array of strategies to establish a sustainable funding stream for the state's roads, highways and bridges. These include dedicating more of the state's sales tax on fuel purchases to infrastructure, increasing and indexing fuel excise taxes and implementing fees on alternative fuel vehicles.

"Indiana benefited greatly from the Major Moves program that accelerated our timeline and funded \$4 billion worth of projects over the last decade. But those dollars are spent or allocated. It's time to move forward with the next generation of resources to drive our economy by moving people and products throughout our state and beyond," says Indiana Chamber President and CEO Kevin Brinegar.

"Legislative action is sorely needed to address glaring needs and begin implementing long-term strategies to allow our state to live up to its 'Crossroads of America' designation."

Brinegar concludes that the good news is that legislative leaders, the Governor and others are on the same page about the need; the challenge will be how to get there since each has proposed different paths.

The Indiana Chamber's support for expanding the state's civil rights law to include protection for sexual orientation and gender identity is rooted in the belief of equality for all and the recognition of

the economic development ramifications for inaction. (This, and all Indiana Chamber legislative positions, was developed by employees of member companies serving on various public policy committees. Those positions were ultimately approved by the executive committee and full board of directors).

"Simply put, we believe this expansion is a necessary move for the General Assembly to make," Brinegar stresses. "After the negative perception of our state generated by the Religious Freedom Restoration Act last spring, we need to get this right in order to secure the reputation of Indiana as a hospitable and welcoming place.

"The time has come for Indiana to expand protections against potential discrimination," he continues. "This action will increase the state's future business competitiveness in the recruitment, attraction and retention of talent, as well as enhance respect for all employers and employees. We have been and will continue to encourage our state leaders to work together to take this next critical step."

Another initiative the organization will again pursue is a work sharing program, which will allow employers to maintain a skilled stable workforce during temporary downturns and enable employees to keep their jobs but with reduced hours and salary (which is partially offset by unemployment insurance). This program has enjoyed support on both sides of the aisle the last few years, but has yet to cross the finish line.

"There is no negative impact on the state's unemployment insurance fund. Instead of paying full benefits to a smaller group of recipients, a larger group of employees will receive limited benefits – but most importantly remain on the job," Brinegar explains. "There is

Infrastructure funding will be one of the headline issues in the 2016 General Assembly and is a top priority for the Indiana Chamber.



no reason not to enact a work share program to help meet future employee and employer needs. They deserve that option.”

Brinegar hopes a new report conducted by Ball State University and commissioned by the Indiana Chamber for the Indiana Department of Workforce Development will allay any remaining concerns that work share will have any undesired effects for the state.

One Indiana Chamber priority previously announced – granting more associate degrees for students with the appropriate credit – is showing promise of being accomplished through the Commission for Higher Education (CHE).

In December, CHE made it possible for the state’s four-year institutions to award associate degrees to their “stop-out” students (those obviously with a clear break in their education) who have the proper coursework.

“This would give students more opportunity for postsecondary attainment and then obviously help with employment,” Brinegar offers. “Specifically, it would help fill the gap for those individuals who went to a four-year school but for whatever reason couldn’t continue. This would be a viable path for them to turn their efforts into a two-year degree and become more attractive to employers.”

## Mark Your Calendars

The 2016 legislative session begins January 5 and will adjourn no later than March 14; conference committees start March 3.

Key deadlines:

- Initial committee reports – January 28
- Bill passage by first chamber – February 3
- Committee reports on bills from opposite chamber – February 25 (Senate) and February 29 (House)
- Bill passage by opposite chamber – March 2 (Senate) and March 3 (House)

On February 9, at the midpoint of the General Assembly, the Indiana Chamber holds its annual Legislative Dinner at the Indiana Roof Ballroom in downtown Indianapolis. This year’s event, presented by Ice Miller, features Charlie Cook; he is the editor and publisher of the “Cook Political Report”, an independent, non-partisan newsletter that analyzes state and national elections. Networking with legislators and others will also be front and center. The Legislative Dinner traditionally brings together more than 400 of Indiana’s top business leaders as well as many of the state’s elected officials and agency heads. For more details or to register, go to [www.indianachamber.com/specialevents](http://www.indianachamber.com/specialevents).

The other two legislative priorities for the Indiana Chamber are maintaining a fair and equitable system for the state’s commercial property assessment and appeal procedures (in the face of recent “big box” retail stores’ appeals and reaction to that); and expanding publicly-funded preschool from the pilot program to statewide so more children are

prepared to enter kindergarten. Legislative leaders have already indicated that will likely be a 2017 budget year discussion, but momentum must be maintained.

A complete rundown of the Indiana Chamber’s 2016 key legislative initiatives, both top goals and additional areas of focus, is available at [www.indianachamber.com/priorities](http://www.indianachamber.com/priorities).

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