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By EARL WATT

• Leader & Times

Of all the budget proposals on the table, highway funding will get trimmed no matter which version is selected.

That was the message from Reid Petty Friday during a legislative update at the Rock Island Depot.

Petty was joined by State Senator Garrett Love in providing an update in the final days of the 2013 legislative session.

“We are still going to lose highway funding no matter what,” Petty said. “No matter what budget ends up getting passed there will be several hundred million dollars worth of highway funding that won’t be there. However, that won’t affect T-Works projects.”

The 10-mile expansion east of Liberal is still slated for construction as part of the T-Works program, but the reduction in highway funding would most likely delay any immediate aspirations to expand the majority of Highway 54 between Liberal and Wichita to four lanes any time soon.

Petty also provided an update about a change in the law for anyone on public assistance or public employees that are now subject to being drug tested if they are suspected of using drugs.

“If you are found guilty the first time, you have to go through some sort of drug program that is funded by the federal government,” Petty said. “A second time, you are going to lose (your assistance) for a year. A third time you lose it all together. If you have children, that was the main concern with a lot of people who were against it, maybe a parent is on drugs and they would lose the welfare and the kids wouldn’t be able to eat. But it is set up to where there could be a surrogate responsible for the children, and they would receive the money, and they could go out and purchase food for the children.”

The bill passed with overwhelming support, and Gov. Sam Brownback signed it into law.

Senator Love shared that the veto session has also become a time to give the budget a closer look.

“With the veto session, that is the time we look and see if we want to override or make changes to the bills the governor vetoes,” he said. “The veto session has been the time when you finish everything, especially the budget. Part of that is to get better estimates from the budget director and budget heads. You see what the revenues will look like for the coming year, and it helps us make better decisions on spending.”

Kansas is required to have a balanced budget, and Love said that requirement could help the federal government as well.

He also discussed the importance of maintaining Highway 54 upgrades in the T-Works program.

“My No. 1 priority when it comes to T-Works is Highway 54,” Love said. “We had additional mileage put on to our project.” Five more miles west of Cunningham was added to the Highway 54 project. That, coupled with the 10 miles east of Liberal leaves about 140 of the 200 miles between Liberal and Wichita with dangerous two-lane traffic including heavy semi content. Highway 54 is one of the deadliest two-lane highways in the nation.

“We want to see our funding stay on pace,” Love said. “There was concern earlier in the session that would jeopardize that. The Governor’s office knows very well this needs to be a high priority for them, and they assured us that it is. Those will be protected and strengthened.”

Love also shared about changes to unemployment insurance.

“Our bank went down hundreds of millions of dollars and into debt,” Love said. “We put in a compromise with benefits lessened, and businesses who use the funds the most will pay more into it. When the rates are lower, you have more jobs available.”

Love added that while government tries to be compassionate, it can actually do harm by extended benefits too long and discourage the drive to get a job.

“You create a cycle of poverty,” Love said.

EDITOR’S NOTE — Love and Petty took several questions from those in attendance. To see those responses, watch upcoming editions of the Leader & Times.

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