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Key Business Issues Await Legislature's Attention Upon Its Return

The dust has barely settled on Tuesday's election, and already state lawmakers are returning to Columbus to resume work. This week will see the first House session, and just the second Senate session, since the end of May. The legislature is making a hasty return because there are only three weeks left before the curtain officially comes down on this two-year session. The target date for the General Assembly's expected sine die (final) adjournment is Thursday, December 8. This post-election activity is often referred to as the legislature's "lame duck" session.

For the Ohio Chamber, there are some remaining, critical business priorities that must be completed: overhauling Ohio's broke and broken unemployment compensation system, protecting employers from the escalating costs associated with Ohio's energy mandates, and fixing the state's confusing and burdensome employment discrimination statutes. Fortunately, at least the first two overlap with the publicly stated priorities of both Senate Pres. Keith Faber and Speaker of the House Cliff Rosenberger.

In the spring, the legislature took the important first step in fixing Ohio's unemployment system by forging a plan to pay off Ohio's remaining federal unemployment compensation debt. This action will save Ohio employers approximately \$351 million. However, much more still needs to be done.

Paying off the federal debt without long-term reforms to the system leaves Ohio businesses vulnerable to the same penalties that the legislature worked so hard to eliminate. Truly fixing the system means both benefit payouts and employer contributions must be addressed, in order to provide for long-term solvency.

In 2014, the legislature passed energy reform legislation that suspended Ohio's escalating renewable and energy efficiency mandates for two years. Ohio energy customers have already paid nearly a billion dollars to comply with these mandates, and forecasts suggest they will be paying over \$500 million per year by 2020. The two-year freeze is set to expire at the end of this year, but no action has yet been taken to enact a permanent solution to this problem. Affordable electricity is critically important for the economic competitiveness of Ohio businesses, and something must be done to protect consumers from these looming electricity cost spikes.

The third issue is of similar importance, but has gotten less attention. Senate Bill 268 would improve Ohio's employment discrimination laws by more closely aligning them with federal law. Ohio is currently an outlier on many employment law-related issues, and SB 268 would remedy many of the most onerous provisions of Ohio law.

Securing passage of the above priorities will not be easy, especially during lame duck, when anything can happen as policymakers, interest groups, and others recognize the hourglass is about to run out of sand. As always, the Ohio Chamber will be vigilant during this time in ensuring lawmakers' focus remains on further improving Ohio's business climate.

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