

Property taxes, utility rates, education reform top priority list as Ohio lawmakers return

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Ohio lawmakers are headed back to Columbus this week, and while drawing new maps for their state House and Senate districts remains at the forefront, Republicans and Democrats have several pieces of priority legislation focused on taxes, education and utility costs.

Here's what is on the agenda:

Lowering property taxes

Home values across Ohio have exploded over the last three years, and these historic increases will mean much larger tax bills for some Ohioans but not others.

That's because Ohio has a complex system of constitutional rules, state laws and overlapping taxing districts that ultimately result in people who live in homes of the same value paying wildly different amounts.

"Every home is different, every township, every school district," Butler County Auditor Nancy Nix said. "There is no one size fits all, and that's why it's so hard to explain anything to anybody."

Both Republicans and Democrats want to simplify the system in the long term. In the short term, they want to mitigate the increases coming in 2024's tax bills.

Sen. George Lang, R-West Chester, told the USA TODAY Network Ohio Bureau he plans to push for changing how home values get calculated, at least temporarily. Ohio uses the last year of home sale data to determine what homes are worth, but Lang wants the state to use three years.

In his home county, Bulter County, the average property value increase would drop from 38% to 24%.

When asked why these rates weren't adjusted before property value letters started going out, Senate President Matt Huffman, R-Lima, said the state budget got in the way.

"You can't really have a discussion during the budget because everyone is so desperate to secure their funding," Huffman said. "The real changes like this have to happen in the nonbudget times."

As for other property tax changes, Rep. Dani Isaacsohn, D-Cincinnati, teamed up with Rep. Thomas Hall, R-Madison Township, on a bill that would freeze property taxes for certain owner-occupied homes.

They're calling it the 70/70 property tax freeze because it would expand Ohio's senior homestead exemption to those age 70 or older who have a total income of \$70,000 or less.

Big changes for higher education

A controversial bill to change how Ohio's public colleges and universities operate will remain a priority for Senate Republicans this fall.

Senate Bill 83 would ban most mandatory diversity training, create new tenure rules, prohibit faculty from striking, mandate new American civics classes, place extra scrutiny on partnerships with Chinese universities and penalize professors who fail to create "classrooms free from bias."

The legislation passed the Senate this spring and briefly became part of the state budget before being removed during final negotiations.

Huffman told reporters he had assurances from House Speaker Jason Stephens, R-Kitts Hill, that SB 83 would move this fall.

More police training

After a Circleville police dog attacked a truck driver, Gov. Mike DeWine called for better training for Ohio law enforcement officers generally and smaller departments specifically.

The governor proposed building a scenario-based training facility as part of the upcoming capital budget in 2024. And he asked for "guaranteed funds" from state lawmakers so departments could use this facility at little to no cost.

"(Sen. Frank Hoagland, R-Mingo Junction,) is going to be pursuing that," Huffman said. "Our plan is to get a bill passed before the end of the year."

More police training is an idea both Democrats and Republicans support.

Columbus Democrats also called for better training after the fatal shooting of Ta'Kiya Young in a Kroger parking lot by a Blendon Township officer.

Making Ohio housing affordable

Under the leadership of Sen. Michele Reynolds, R-Canal Winchester, the Senate is embarking on a deep dive into the rising costs of home ownership across Ohio and what, if anything, lawmakers can do about it.

"The goal is to do that deep dive and get an understanding of what we are doing here in Ohio and what we could be doing better," Reynolds said.

Who should pay when megaprojects come to town?

When Intel and other major companies consider Ohio for their new factory or manufacturing plant, one of the questions is who pays to bring utilities to the location if they don't already exist.

If it's the utility company, whose rates are set by the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio, the question becomes how much of those costs should be passed on to consumers. And that's what Sen. Rob McColley, R-Napoleon, wants to debate when lawmakers return.

"The current infrastructure development rider limits the amount you can charge to a customer to \$1.50 per month," McColley said. "In some cases, that is turning out to be inadequate to pay for the asset."

These riders are temporary, but whether they should be increased or expedited is contentious.

McColley supports increasing the total amount and years they can be collected for these large-scale megaprojects like intel. And he's open to approving increases to get other sites ready for development.

"That would be a little more speculative," McColley said. "(But) JobsOhio would have the site certified. The Department of Development would have to sign off."