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Bio-fuel, revenue likely hot topics for 2007 legislature

By **Ed Galucki**
Staff Writer

Members of the Lonoke Area Chamber of Commerce were given a glimpse into the workings of the state legislature during the monthly board of directors meeting on Thursday. Keynote speakers for the meeting were State Sen. Jack Critcher, president pro tem, and State Rep. Benny Petrus, speaker of the house, for the 86th General Assembly that will convene in January 2007.

Lonoke County's legislators, State Sen. Bobby Glover and State Rep. Lenville Evans, introduced Critcher, of Batesville, and Petrus, of Stuttgart.

Glover explained that the offices of president pro tem and speaker of the house are the two highest positions in the state legislature. Each position is filled by vote of the senate and house, he said.

Neither side of the legislature any longer considers seniority in filling the post, Glover said. This, he said, was brought about by term limits set by Amendment 73 to the state Constitution.

"We have the strictest term limits of anywhere in the United States," Glover said. Those are three, two-year terms in the House and two, four-year terms in the Senate, he said.

Term limits this year have put Lonoke County into a favorable position, chamber members heard from Critcher and Petrus. Between Glover and Evans, the county will have two of the more powerful members of the legislature.

During the next session the most senior member will have four years in the House; in the senate, Critcher said he is number four in seniority, but there others like Glover who have more than 20 years' experience in the legislature. With such background, Glover's advice is valuable, he said.

Petrus predicted that Evans would be among the more powerful representatives for the 2007 session. It is likely that Evans will be elected chairman of the first caucus; this is the caucus that appoints members to committees, he said.

"This will be a powerful position for him to be in," Petrus said. "I look forward to working with him on that," he said.

In his remarks, Crichter listed several areas that are likely to be of major interest.

"Number one is the [revenue] surplus. Everyone is talking about the surplus," Crichter said. Estimates are that it could be about \$428 million, he said.

"I think we need to be real careful about getting rid of that. Whether it is by rebate or tax cut, or just throwing it here and there spending money like there is no tomorrow.



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"We did that a few years ago... in the mid-90s, slashed income taxes over \$90 million a year," Crichter said. Then a few years later revenue was below projections.

"We had to call a special session and raise taxes on this and taxes on that, had to put in an income tax surcharge, we were scrambling for money. I don't want to go down that road again," Crichter said.

Crichter said estimates are that Medicaid could need another \$300 million; education facilities could need another \$300 to \$400 million; prisons may need another \$80 million or so; cities and counties have not had a raise in their turnback for "20-some-odd-years," ... "There are a lot of needs out there," Crichter said.

From the perspective of revenue production, the potential for gas production in the Fayetteville Shale "Is exciting," Crichter said. Some activity in that is happening in Lonoke County, he said.

Another great prospect is the potential of bio-fuels, Crichter said. Providing state incentives for development in those areas could be a great help for the agriculture industry, he said.

"But, in government and politics, four or five months is an eternity," Crichter said. By the time January comes, the emphasis might have shifted elsewhere, he said.

Petrus in his remarks said he is, "Really, really excited about the upcoming session," because of the friendly atmosphere between the House and Senate. "That is so important with what happens in state government," he said.

"[The House] could do everything in the world that we wanted and just breeze it through, but if it is not on the other end, or vice versa, it just doesn't happen," Petrus said.

In regard to the revenue surplus, "We don't really have a surplus problem, we have a prioritizing decision to make," Petrus said. The needs are probably three or four times the surplus, he said.

Bio-diesel and ethanol projects are going to be important and, "You are going to see us really move forward with that," Petrus said. "We have to break our dependency on foreign oil ... We wouldn't be over there losing men's and women's lives if it wasn't for oil," he said.

Developing bio-fuels could answer an number of needs, Petrus said. "We could bring farming back to where they could survive. I'm really excited about the opportunities in bio-fuels," he said.