

REP. GRIFFIN ANNOUNCES IN-DISTRICT OFFICE HOURS

Throughout January, state Rep. Beth Griffin (R-Mattawan) will meet with area residents during scheduled office hours.

"I think it is important to begin this new term by hearing directly from people in my community," Griffin said in a news release. "I look forward to having discussions on how we can move our state forward and hope to take any ideas shared and incorporate them into the House's policy priorities for the upcoming year."

Rep. Griffin will be available Friday, Jan. 25, at the following times and locations:

- 9 to 10 a.m. at Green Glass Coffee, 229 E. Michigan Ave., in Paw Paw;
- 10:30 to 11:30 a.m. at Hartford City Hall, 19 W. Main St., in Hartford;
- 1 to 2 p.m. at the South Haven Library, 314 Broadway St., in South Haven; and
- 3:30 to 4:30 p.m. at Cooper Township Hall, 1590 D. Avenue W., in Kalamazoo.

No appointments are necessary. Those who are unable to attend at the scheduled times but would like an opportunity to talk with Rep. Griffin may call her office at (517) 373-0839 or email BethGriffin@house.mi.gov. — STAFF REPORTS

PAQUETTE, GRIFFIN AND LASATA BEGIN THEIR TERMS IN MICHIGAN LEGISLATURE

Recently, southwest Michigan's newly elected officials were formally sworn in at the state Capitol in Lansing.

State Rep. Brad Paquette (R-Berrien Springs), state Rep. Beth Griffin (R-Mattawan) and state Sen. Kim LaSata (R-St. Joseph) all took the oath of office as the state marked the opening day of the 100th Michigan Legislature.

Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice Stephen Markman administered the oath to LaSata and Griffin, while Michigan Supreme Court Justice Bridget Mary McCormack administered the oath to Paquette. — STAFF REPORTS

Senator Stabenow introduces legislation to lower cost of prescription drugs

U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), ranking member on the Senate Finance Subcommittee on Health Care, introduced legislation aimed at lowering the cost of prescription drugs.

Americans pay – by far – the highest prices in the world for prescription drugs. Already this year, prices on more than 1,000 medications have experienced an average price hike of 6 percent.

"It's absurd that our own government is prohibited from negotiating lower prescription drug prices for seniors under Medicare and that people across our own Michigan border in Canada pay so much less for their prescriptions," said Senator Stabenow. "My bills will help put an end to these outrageous practices and Big Pharma's price gouging of American families."

Pharmaceutical and health product lobbying reached \$216 million last year, more than any other industry. Stabenow is introducing two pieces of legislation that will combat rising prescription drug costs:

- The "Empowering Medicare Seniors to Negotiate Drug Prices Act" would allow the Secretary of Health and Human Services to directly negotiate with drug companies for price discounts of their drugs, which is banned under current law.
- The "Affordable and Safe Prescription Drug Importation Act" authorizes the Secretary of Health and Human Services to issue regulations permitting wholesalers, licensed U.S. pharmacies, and individuals to import safe medications from licensed Canadian sellers that are manufactured at facilities inspected by the Food and Drug Administration. Currently, Americans pay about 40 percent more on prescriptions per person than Canadians do.

This follows Senator Stabenow's successful effort last year to get her bipartisan "Know the Lowest Price Act" passed into law – cracking down on outrageous gag clauses that stop pharmacists from telling customers that they could pay less for their prescription if they pay out of pocket. — STAFF REPORTS

Why a national marijuana law could be closer to reality in 2019

So far, the task of loosening marijuana laws has been left to individual states to implement. But that changed when the Democrats won control of the House of Representatives last month.

"The states have been carrying the water for the pro-marijuana forces for several years but that may finally start to change," says Sarah Lee Gossett Parrish (www.sarahleegossettparrish.com), a cannabis industry lawyer. "The federal government is about to get involved in a big way. Uniform national marijuana laws are certainly now on the table."

Oregon Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-OR) has already laid out a blueprint to advance national marijuana legislation. Blumenauer's plan could begin as soon as Democrats take the gavel next month, he says. His strategy would include starting to move the 37 bills currently unable to make it to the House floor under Republicans onto committee schedules, for hearings and proposed legislation.

Here are some of the House committees that could be looking at marijuana issues and what they would be considering:

House Judiciary Committee. Rep. Blumenauer wants the House to "deschedule" marijuana. It is currently labeled a "Schedule 1" drug, the most tightly restricted category reserved for drugs that have "no currently accepted medical use." Cannabis advocates have been trying to change that classification since 1972.

House Veterans Affairs Committee. Hearings may be held on proposed legislation to give veterans access to medical marijuana.

House Financial Services Committee. The focus would be on banking changes. Right now, cannabis businesses are unable to use banks, causing them to be an all-cash business, which makes them more susceptible to robberies and violence. There are many other advantages for cannabis producers if they could have access to banking institutions.

Further optimism about the future of passing national marijuana laws is due to two major roadblocks being removed. Attorney General Jeff Sessions was fired by President Donald Trump and Texas Rep. Pete Sessions was defeated by Democrat Colin Allred. Although Jeff Sessions had more of a national profile, Rep. Pete Sessions was arguably more important for pro-marijuana forces to remove since he was chairman of the powerful House Rules Committee. He has been credited with keeping almost all marijuana legislation from reaching the floor of Congress for a vote.

"No marijuana bill could get a floor vote under Representative Sessions," Parrish says. "He was probably the biggest legislative roadblock to comprehensive national marijuana legislation. Now that he is gone, there is a lot of optimism that many of these bills may finally get a vote." — SARAH LEE GOSSETT PARRISH