

Capitol Network News

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PLANE LEASE SURPRISES SOME LAWMAKERS

By Shawn Ashley
Staff Writer

■(GIT) Some state lawmakers were surprised to learn on Wednesday that funds had been appropriated to the Department of Public Safety for the lease and operation of a new state airplane for the benefit of the executive branch and the legislature.

The revelation came during the meeting of the General Conference Committee on Appropriations' subcommittee on judicial, public safety and law enforcement issues. Sen. Gene Stipe, D-McAlester, noticed the twice-mentioned item on the agency's fiscal year 1997 budget analysis and questioned acting DPS commissioner Bob Ricks about the matter.

Funding for the lease and operation of the aircraft — \$602,000 — was included in SB837, the general appropriations bill, approved earlier this session by both legislative houses and signed by the governor on March 19.

Ricks said the aircraft, a KingAir 350, will be lease-purchased over the course of some four to five years. The plane, which can accommodate up to eight passengers and has a range of 1,200 to 1,500 miles, will be available for use by the governor, as well as members of the legislature, Ricks added.

"I've got no problem with that," Stipe said, "but it ought to be available for use by state agencies, too."

Other members of the subcommittee sat in stunned silence, quietly asking one another whether they were aware of having approved the funds for the aircraft.

Asked by a member of the subcommittee whether the appropriation was "a done deal," vice chairman Rep. Danny Hilliard, D-Sulphur, said the funding had been approved when the legislature considered the general appropriation bill in March.

"Some of us didn't know we were voting for that," another lawmaker mumbled. None of the lawmakers, however, spoke openly in opposition to the appropriation.

Ricks went on to add that the decision by former Governor David Walters to sell the executive branch's last aircraft "was

probably a mistake." Walters sold the aircraft and then leased it back on an as-needed basis.

"I think it has probably ended up costing us more to lease it back than it did to own it," Ricks explained. "I think it's probably better for us to own. It just makes better economic sense."

Asked how long it would take for the state to buy the new aircraft under the lease-purchase plan, Ricks estimated four to five years. At which time, Hilliard noted, a provision of the appropriations bill will prevent whoever is governor from selling the plane without legislative approval.

"Any airplane acquired from funds appropriated by this section shall not be disposed of without the prior approval of the Legislature by concurrent resolution," reads SB837.

RYAN LUKE BILL PASSES HOUSE

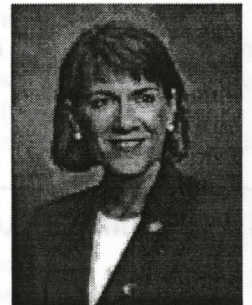
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■(GIT) House members voted overwhelmingly on Tuesday in favor of the so-called Ryan Luke child abuse prevention bill, moving the matter to the Senate for its consideration.

Consideration of the measure, HB2053, by Rep. Laura Boyd, D-Norman, had been delayed nearly a week while its author and conference committee members worked out concerns over the possible costs of the proposal.

"Last week, the financial impact statement had an element we hadn't anticipated," Boyd told House members, referring to an estimate by the Department of Human Services that put the cost of implementing the bill at \$1.4 million. That estimate was more than \$1 million higher than a similar analysis by the House, Boyd said.

Boyd reiterated on Tuesday that the difference in the figures resulted from DHS' contention that the agency would need to add 20 caseworkers and 4 supervisors in order



Rep. Laura Boyd

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