



2024 Legislative Session *Preview*

By John Rustin

As this edition of *Family North Carolina* magazine is being sent to press, the North Carolina General Assembly has just reconvened for the 2024 Legislative Session. Technically, a continuation of last year's "Long" Session, this year's "Short" Session began on April 24 and will likely last for several months. As is typical for the second year of the legislative biennium, state lawmakers are expected to focus primarily on making adjustments to the state budget, which is likely to top \$30.8 billion for the state's 2024-25 fiscal year. In addition to the budget, a number of other key bills will also be on the docket for consideration, some of these held over from last year. The following is a summary of several of those items.

Further Gambling Expansion

One issue that dominated the waning days of the 2023 Legislative Session was a proposal to establish four commercial gambling casinos and to authorize the operation of tens of thousands of Video Lottery Terminals (VLTs) across the state. This major gambling expansion proposal seemed to appear almost out of thin air right after lawmakers ratified legislation to legalize sports betting and parimutuel wagering on horse racing in North Carolina. Although a formal written plan was never put forth, three of the proposed casino developments reportedly would be located in Rockingham, Nash, and Anson counties, and another—to be operated by the Lumbee Indian Tribe—would be located somewhere in eastern North Carolina.

It is important to understand that these are not just stand-alone casinos, but are huge casino gambling developments, including hotels, restaurants, entertainment venues, meeting spaces, etc. Just imagine what kind of impact these developments would have on existing hotels, restaurants, movie theaters, and other entertainment spaces as they cannibalize the local economy, divert millions of dollars away from local businesses, and siphon away already hard-to-find employees.



Moreover, over 50,000 VLTs—essentially video poker machines—would be operated under the auspices of the state lottery. These highly addictive gambling devices would be located in convenience stores, gas stations, restaurants, bars, and other locations around the state. Adding video machine gambling to already existing Powerball, Mega Millions, Keno, matching numbers games, scratch-off tickets, and online "Digital Instants," would send the incidents of problem and pathological gambling in North Carolina through the roof, along with all the related social and economic problems, such as increases in the crimes of theft and embezzlement, personal bankruptcy, substance abuse, domestic violence, child abuse, divorce, and even suicide.

In 2023, it was reported that over 70 contract lobbyists were hired by gambling interests to push for the legalization of commercial casinos and VLTs, but these efforts fell short after legislative leaders realized the votes did not exist in either chamber to approve the plan.

Regardless, we fully anticipate these efforts will return, so we must respond in force with a statewide outpouring of grassroots opposition to further gambling expansion in North Carolina.

Marijuana Legalization

Another issue that failed passage last year, but that we expect will resurface in the Short Session, is a proposal to legalize marijuana for "medical" use in North Carolina. This bill, Senate Bill 3, entitled "NC Compassionate Care Act," was approved by the State Senate in March 2023, but was never taken up in the State House last year.

SB 3 proposes to establish an extensive framework for the licensing, manufacture, distribution, sale, possession, and use of marijuana as a "treatment" for a wide variety of "medical" conditions. Despite the fact that the U.S. Food & Drug Administration has not approved marijuana for medical



use, and the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Neurology, and the American Psychiatric Association do not support its use as medicine, proponents continue to push hard for the bill's passage.

As more states across the U.S. legalize marijuana for "medical" and "recreational" purposes, more problems are coming to light. Incidents of impaired driving, drug-related crimes, health issues, and other maladies are all on the rise. North Carolina lawmakers would do well to consider the growing evidence against marijuana legalization and reject this misguided proposal.

Opportunity Scholarships


In last year's budget bill—House Bill 259—the N.C. General Assembly greatly expanded the state's Opportunity Scholarship Program to make the K-12 school choice plan universally available to all students in the state, provided that funding is available. North Carolina families responded with overwhelming interest. As a matter of comparison, in the 2023-2024 school year, just over 32,300 North Carolina students are receiving Opportunity Scholarships. Following the changes approved in HB 259, the state received 72,000 new applications for the 2024-25 school year. The law directs that grant amounts are determined on a sliding scale (ranging from approximately \$3,360 to \$7,468) based upon household income, and lower income families are given first priority.

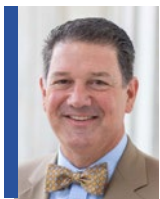


While the General Assembly also increased funding for Opportunity Scholarships several years into the future, the current level of funding for the next school year will fall significantly short of the demand, leaving nearly 55,000 hopeful students without a scholarship in the coming school year.

School choice proponents are urging state lawmakers to take action early in the 2024 session to provide a special appropriation to bridge this funding gap and ensure as many applicants as possible are able to take advantage of North Carolina's Opportunity Scholarship Program.

Stay Informed!

Undoubtedly, many more issues will be discussed and debated by the General Assembly this year, but those mentioned above are some of our top priorities. When the state legislature is in session, you can rest assured that NC Family is there looking out for the interests of North Carolina families and serving as a strong voice for Biblical values in our state's political and public policy arenas. [You can stay on top of all the action by visiting our website at **NCFamily.org** and signing up to receive our emails and Action Alerts throughout the session.](#) Working together, we can seek to fulfill NC Family's vision of "A state and nation where God is honored, religious freedom flourishes, families thrive, and life is cherished." 



John L. Rustin is President of the North Carolina Family Policy Council

