

Lawmakers set topics for 2008 session

Senate president backs away from full-scale health-care plan

By Joe Hanel

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DENVER – Top legislators offered clues Tuesday to the first topics they will tackle in the 2008 legislative session, which begins this morning.

First up: voting machines.

Next month: health care.

And maybe never: a tax increase.

Last month, Secretary of State Mike Coffman disallowed several models of voting machines. Machines in La Plata and Montezuma counties passed the test, but legislators are talking about statewide changes. They need to act quickly, said Sen. Ken Gordon, D-Denver. Gordon distrusts computerized voting machines.

“I think primarily this election should be handled with paper,” Gordon said.

But Rep. David Balmer, R-Centennial, will sponsor a bill on Coffman’s behalf to make it easier to recertify the voting machines that failed.

“I think it’s important we maintain a variety of ways for people to vote,” Balmer said.

Gordon wants the Legislature to finish its plan by mid-February. The main event of the 2008 session could be health-care reform. But top Democrats don’t expect major bills on the topic until Jan. 31. That’s when the state’s blue-ribbon health-care commission will make its report to the Legislature.

But already on Tuesday, lawmakers were discounting the possibility of a full-scale health-care plan.

Senate President Peter Groff said he wants to offer insurance to the 180,000 Colorado children who lack it.

“Hopefully, we’ll be able to cover all kids, our most vulnerable population,” Groff said. But he doubts the Legislature can pass a plan to cover the nearly 800,000 Coloradans who lack health insurance.

“I just don’t think we can do it in 120 days,” Groff said.

A full-scale health-care plan could cost as much as \$1.3 billion and possibly involve a tax increase.

Democrats also have talked about tax increases for transportation or colleges. But they said Tuesday that a tax increase is unlikely.

“Taxes represent a last resort,” said Speaker of the House Andrew Romanoff, D-Denver.

However, the state’s highways need a cash infusion, transportation experts say. The governor’s transportation commission said the state needs an extra \$500 million just to take care of the roads it has, and it will take an extra \$1 billion or \$2 billion to improve roads and transit.

But legislators on Tuesday shied away from the large price tag.

“Every time you put together a panel, they’re going to come back and say we need more money,” said House Minority Leader Mike May, R-Parker.

The 120-day session starts this morning, and Gov. Bill Ritter will deliver his State of the State speech Thursday.

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