

## Biz Group Briefs Senate During Open Caucus

By Colin A. Young STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, FEB. 15, 2017....As senators munched on slices of pizza in a room off the Senate Chamber, the Senate and a business advocacy group set out Wednesday to restart their relationship in the new legislative session.

Viewed by lobbyists and observers as the less business-friendly branch of state government, the Senate on Wednesday convened a joint caucus—Democrats and Republicans—to better acquaint themselves with the Massachusetts Business Roundtable, the first in what the Senate president said will be a series of such meetings.

JD Chesloff, executive director of the roundtable, said he and Marcy Reed—the National Grid president who chairs the roundtable's board—met with Senate President Stanley Rosenberg late last year to discuss "how we can improve our relationship with the Senate."

"It was a really terrific, frank, open conversation," he said. "We talked about some ideas about improving communication, working better together, finding areas of common ground, how do we engage productively when we agree and engage productively when we don't agree."

Business groups have found more allies or a leadership more attentive to their concerns in the more moderate House. After the end of formal sessions last summer, the Associated Industries of Massachusetts scored lawmakers from both chambers on how they voted on issues important to AIM. The results, the influential business lobby said, painted "a tale of two chambers."

"While the House of Representatives and Speaker Robert DeLeo successfully forged consensus on important measures such as wage equity and energy, the Senate hewed to a more progressive, ideological approach that produced a steady stream of bills with the potential to harm the Massachusetts economy," AIM wrote in its August scorecard, which bestowed the lowest score of any lawmaker upon Rosenberg.

Chesloff noted that his organization is not involved in day-to-day lobbying on a large number of bills, like AIM is. He also made clear that the Business Roundtable is not a chamber of commerce or trade association, but rather "more of a 36,000-foot policy organization that goes deep on a few issues."

Wednesday's meeting with the full Senate, Chesloff said, marks "the beginning of what I hope is a reintroduction or introduction of ourselves to you, and working together."

Chesloff walked senators and aides through the roundtable's priorities, highlighted by workforce development and transportation infrastructure, and shared some thoughts on globalization, millennials in the workplace, diversity in the workplace, and the uncertainty in Washington, D.C.

After a roughly 20-minute presentation from Chesloff, the Senate held a question and answer session but did not allow reporters or the public to attend that portion of the meeting at the Business Roundtable's request, according to Rosenberg's office.

Though the Business Roundtable was the first, Rosenberg said the Senate plans to hold a "series of these discussions with various associations here in Massachusetts in the coming months."

Shortly after the caucus, Rosenberg named Sen. Jason Lewis as the new co-chair of the Joint Labor and Workforce Development Committee, a panel at the center of business-worker issues. Lewis, a Winchester Democrat, outlined what he saw as the major issues likely to come before the committee: an increase of the minimum wage to \$15 an hour, establishing a paid family and medical leave program, and restricting non-compete agreements between employers and employees.

The business community has largely opposed efforts to raise the hourly wage floor to \$15 from \$11. Lewis told the News Service the panel will likely start off by examining how bringing the wage to its current level has affected families and businesses. Asked whether he supported a \$15 an hour minimum wage, he said he has "been supportive of raising the minimum wage." Lewis is listed as a co-sponsor of Sen. Ken Donnelly's \$15 an hour wage hike bill.

"There's challenging issues that have to be addressed in terms of impact on small businesses, and also what happens to the tipped minimum wage, which is another important part of the discussion," Lewis said.

Rosenberg also named Sen. Michael Barrett as the new chair of the Joint Energy Committee. Barrett supports a controversial bill to put a price on carbon, which the senator says will lead to a cleaner environment and revenue-neutral rebates but which opponents view as a new tax.

[Katie Lannan contributed reporting]

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