

News From The States

EVENING WRAP

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By [Kate Queram](#)

Welcome back, newsletter fam! It's a brand new year, which normal people mark with champagne and plans for self-improvement while the Extremely Online Political People* lurk in the background, refreshing their news feeds and waiting for a chance to resume talking about politics**. In other words: New year, same me.

*Hello, it's me. (And probably you.)

**[Generally off-limits](#) during the holidays. (*Ohmygod I'm so glad to be back.*)



The Big Takeaway

Let's just get this out of the way: Yes, it is officially a presidential election year. No, we are not going to talk about that today, both because *no one wants to talk about that today* and also because we need to talk about state legislatures. [Thirty-seven](#) (!) of them will reconvene this month, five of which will be underway by the time this newsletter hits your inbox. (What a time to be alive!)

Another eight states will kick things off on Wednesday, including New Hampshire, where lawmakers have already filed more than 1,000 bills, [the New Hampshire Bulletin reported](#). Some are controversial. Some are destined for a swift defeat. And some are just plain weird.



*A RELEVANT NEW HAMPSHIRE PHOTO, WHO KNEW
(Photo by Lea Scaddan/Getty Images)*

There is, for example, [a bill](#) to ban treasure-hunting with a metal detector on athletic fields and school grounds, which apparently exposes students “to the risk of injury.” There’s [a proposal](#) to mandate a four-day work week, and [a proposal](#) to allow businesses to pay employees with gold or silver, regardless of whether those employees might prefer, you know, normal money.

[One bill](#) urges state agencies to forestall the adoption of a second area code by “promot[ing] and adopt[ing] telephone number conservation measures,” while [another](#) would add the phonetic pronunciation of the state (New Hampshire) and its capital (Concord) to an existing law governing various state symbols (because I guess people ... don’t know how to pronounce New Hampshire or Concord?).

And then we have the animal bills. [One proposal](#) would legalize private ownership of kangaroos, small-tailed monkeys, raccoons, foxes, otters, and skunks. (An unrelated — but perhaps prescient — [bill](#) would create a committee to study “the protection of business operators against requests to accommodate customers with fraudulent or untrained service animals.”) There are bills to [ban](#)

[adhesive rodent traps](#), increase protections [for horses](#) and unmuzzle dogs that haven't received [their rabies vaccinations](#). Alas, there was no such love for gray squirrels, which could be hunted year-round under [a bill](#) that would remove the species from the list of game animals.



*Nebraska Gov. Jim Pillen, and what appears to be a statue of a pig.
(Photo by Zach Wendling/Nebraska Examiner)*

Legislative priorities are more straightforward in Nebraska, where Gov. Jim Pillen will *not* be revisiting his decision to reject \$18 million from the federal government to fund a summer food program for needy children. (Like most Nebraskans, he doesn't "believe in welfare.") Instead, Pillen plans to focus on attracting and retaining qualified workers, improving access to child care and a "transformational" tax overhaul that would reduce property tax bills by capping local government spending and reconfiguring state sales tax to make up the difference, [the Nebraska Examiner reported](#).

The plan aims to reduce local property tax payments from \$5 billion to \$3 billion annually by setting "hard caps" on city and county spending increases. (Pillen, a Republican, said the plan would also keep local governments from automatically increasing property taxes as valuations rise, though he did not explain how.) Up to a billion of that tax burden would shift to the state, which could be funded by

increasing the sales tax or by removing exemptions for goods and services like lottery tickets, medication, vehicle repairs or farming equipment. Pillen, a Republican, declined to specify which items might be subject to new taxes, saying only that he would not tax groceries.

“It’s not a valuation problem,” Pillen said. “It’s a spending problem.”



*Dysfunction to all ye (Republicans) who enter here.
(Photo by Annelise Hanshaw/Missouri Independent)*

Politics are the problem in Missouri, where lawmakers are bracing for another chaotic legislative session plagued with Republican infighting, election-year posturing and an [ongoing ethics investigation](#) that could topple the GOP House speaker. Amid the maelstrom, legislators must pass a budget and [renew medical provider taxes](#) to sustain the state’s Medicaid program. Probably, they can manage that, Republican state Rep. Tony Lovasco [told the Missouri Independent](#).

But that’s probably about it, he added.

“I would guess that a sizable amount of the session is going to be spent navigating people making campaign commercials on the House and Senate floor, bickering at each other and trying to force recorded votes that turn into

campaign mailers,” he said.



Flex for the cameras!

(Illustration by Christos Georghiou/Adobe Stock)

But it might still be better than last year’s session, which produced fewer bills than any session in the past three decades except for 2020, which was shortened due to COVID-19. The gridlock was intentional warfare wielded by members of the Senate’s [“conservative caucus,”](#) which disbanded [in 2022](#) only to reemerge this year as the Freedom Caucus. The group’s members sought to frame the rebranding as a positive move that could unite the chamber’s Republicans, which the rest of the chamber’s Republicans said was unlikely. It’s the same dysfunction, just under a different name, according to state Sen. Lincoln Hough.

“It’s going to add another layer of complication every day that we go out there on the Senate floor,” said Hough, a Springfield Republican and chairman of the Senate appropriations committee.

All of which is fine with Democrats. It’s possible that Republicans can pull it together to do some basic governing, if only because they’re up for reelection, said state Rep. Peter Merideth, a St. Louis Democrat. But if they don’t, well, that’s OK, too. Because when Republicans fight, GOP bills tend to suffer.

“I’m going to remain hopeful,” Merideth said, “that if the last couple of years are any indication, adding more fuel to the fire this year will only help kill a lot of the things that are really toxic.”

I'm slipping under: [California new laws for 2024: Cheaper vasectomies and birth control](#) ... [A long list of priorities for Connecticut delegation, but not a lot of time](#) ... [Kansas senator proposes job limits to avoid potential conflicts of interest in state government](#) ... [McConnell applauds Kentucky Republicans' rise at public swearing-in of constitutional officers](#) ... [How the Maine legislature works and other good things to know as new session begins](#) ... [Juvenile justice among criminal justice reform topics up for discussion in Maryland's upcoming legislative session](#) ... [Mississippi's 2024 legislative session begins today. Here's what to expect.](#) ... [Missouri House Republicans choose Axiom Strategies executive to lead campaign effort](#) ... [Six legislators will step up from the New Jersey Assembly to the Senate](#) ... [In New Jersey Shore district, incumbent-topping rabbi brings a fresh voice to the Assembly](#) ... [Four North Dakota state government stories to watch in 2024](#) ... [In Oregon, new year, new laws on housing, addiction and more](#) ... [Will 2024 be the year of LEOBOR reform and granny flats in Rhode Island?](#) ... [Vouchers, border security, abortion: The issues you heard about in 2023 will continue to be hotly debated in Texas in 2024](#)



Also Trending

Officials have yet to reschedule a public hearing over a proposed anaerobic co-digester after a Dec. 4 meeting was canceled because attendance exceeded the capacity of the town hall in Lind, Wis. But residents haven't given up the fight, [the Wisconsin Examiner reported](#).

“Industrial agriculture incentivizes, again with our tax dollars, for farmers to go big,” said Laurie Knutzen, a resident who has been active in opposing the project. “So they increase their herd size ... and one of the bigger outcomes is the massive amounts of manure. And then the farm wants to say that, ‘Well, we have a solution to that, and that’s the digester’ ... So then we’re going to bring more cows, utilize more water, and we’re going to feed the digester more and then we’re just continuing this vicious cycle and the problem is all at the expense of our human health and our natural resources.”



*An anaerobic co-digester in Vermont.
(Photo via the Wisconsin Examiner)*

An anaerobic co-digester is, essentially, a tank that breaks down manure by heating it with other organic waste, then captures the resulting methane and converts it to biogas. Proponents of the technology say it's a vast improvement over allowing manure to break down in open pits, where it releases enough methane to account for 10% of total greenhouse gas emissions [in the U.S.](#)

“Typically, why we implement anaerobic digesters as part of a technological solution is to help improve water, air and soil quality,” says Brian Langold, the director of biogas systems and research development at [UW-Oshkosh](#). “Food waste, raw manure — those wastes already exist, but we can harness them for renewable energy, energy independence, and renewable fertilizer products. It really is promoting sustainability and renewable energy and clean air, water and soil.”

But the digestate created at the end of the process contains the same nutrients as the raw manure that went in the tank, which critics say poses the same risk to local waterways once it's spread across farmland.

“At the tail end of the process, what are you doing to manage all of this? Do you

have land to manage the extra nutrients that you took in at the front end?” said Jim Baumann, who spent nearly four decades working as a water quality engineer at the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. “These are questions that would need to be answered.”

Residents have similar concerns over the proposed digester in Lind, which would be constructed on a 600-cow dairy farm that has operated in the township for 168 years. They’re also worried about increased traffic from trucks hauling waste in and out, the origins of the organic waste mixed with manure in the tank, the state’s classification of byproducts as “industrial waste” and the risk of pollution to local tributaries that feed into Lake Michigan.

“We’re never told specifically who’s going to be bringing what from where to come to this site,” Knutzen said. “We’re not directing our focus on the farm, per se. Our focus is the co-digester and what it will mean for the people who live around it and in our township.”

Local concerns: [Arkansas’ delinquent tire dealers to be cited as revamped tire recycling program takes shape ...](#) [Colorado River crisis looms over state’s landscape decisions ...](#) [Draft federal decision would pause oil and gas drilling for 20 years in Colorado’s Thompson Divide ...](#) [New year, new chapter in long fight over Connecticut’s utility regulator ...](#) [Four Michigan tribes receive funding to support recycling initiatives ...](#) [Minnesota agency in hiring mode as it prepares to roll out new energy programs ...](#) [MVP Southgate natural gas pipeline will no longer cross North Carolina’s Alamance County ...](#) [Ohio energy company paid \\$43M for dirty bailout. Says it acted in a “legal way” ...](#) [December is historically warm in South Dakota, echoing climate change predictions ...](#) [Mountain Valley proposes shrinking Southgate extension in Virginia ...](#) [Building Northwest schools so they can shake off the region’s next megaquake](#)



From The Newsrooms

- [\(Alabama\) A Birmingham mother draws on personal tragedy to assist grieving families](#)
- [Papers of South Carolina’s 1st post-Civil War governor finally owned by his home state](#)
- [Oregon employers rarely pay penalties for wage theft. The state wants that to](#)

[change.](#)

- [Maine advocates expect abortion rights will continue to be ‘a dominant focus in 2024’](#)
- [Missouri opts into summer EBT federal food benefits program](#)



One Last Thing

Congratulations to Michigan wide receiver Roman Wilson, who scored an endorsement deal [with his beloved Crocs](#) just before scoring an overtime-clinching touchdown during Monday’s Rose Bowl playoff.

Congratulations also to *me*, a Michigan grad who found a way to work all of that into a newsletter at the annoyance of everyone in the state of Ohio and also my one friend in North Carolina who likes both Ohio State and Alabama despite never having attended Ohio State or Alabama. Choices were made! Actions have consequences! Michigan will play for [a national title](#) next week!



THE CORRECT CHOICE

(via [Giphy](#))

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