This year’s ASPA Legislative Preview luncheon provided interesting insights into the issues that are expected to rise to the forefront of the 2012 General Legislative Session. Our panel of legislators included House Minority Leader David Litvack (D), District 26, and Senator Karen Mayne (D), District 5. Each legislator was asked to summarize the issues they anticipate will receive the greatest attention this session, and to talk about their own priorities for the year.

Senator Karen Mayne emphasized the importance of education and described some of her specific concerns regarding education in the state. Sen. Mayne said that there are a number of bills currently being drafted that have the potential to enhance and protect education. She referenced the recent Education Week Quality Counts 2012 report, which ranked Utah 42nd in the nation for education, earning an overall grade of a C-, saying she hoped we could improve that assessment in the future. She also expressed her concern that we currently have an insufficient number of paraeducators and others that can provide services to address our entire school-aged population. She stated, “Failing schools aren’t failing...regulations are failing them.”

Sen. Mayne expects to see legislation proposed around public employee benefits and collective bargaining, as these have emerged as major issues around the country. She committed to stay vigilant on these issues, and expressed her belief that employees should always have the right to organize.

Sen. Mayne described the legislation she is planning to present to the legislature, including a bipartisan bill requesting that cities and counties not hold meetings on the night of caucuses, in hopes that this may improve voter turnout. When asked about the caucus system by an audience member, both Sen. Mayne and Rep. Litvack said they have received more feedback from constituents on the system recently than ever before. Sen. Mayne also plans to introduce legislation that would designate graffiti vandalism as a Class C misdemeanor.

Rep. Litvack also expects to see education emerge as a significant issue in this year’s legislative session, particularly around issues of governance in education. The governor’s proposed 2012 budget includes a 1% pay increase for educators, but both Sen. Mayne and Rep. Litvack expressed disappointment that this pay increase would not extend to employees in the state’s higher education system.

Rep. Litvack said we should expect discussion around federalism and state’s rights, with messages and resolutions proposed in order to challenge federal-state relations. He expressed disappointment in what he sees as a trend of drafting legislation that is in essence unconstitutional, challenging Congress to take action to stop the states. Rep. Litvack anticipates that water policy will emerge as a significant issue in the legislature this year, particularly regarding the Southern Utah pipeline. Additionally, he believes we could see changes in the regulation of alcohol-related businesses in the state, looking at the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control’s relationship with state government. When asked by an audience member if he believes alcohol sales will be privatized, Rep. Litvack responded that he does not expect to see that change this session, but there are discussions of this possibility on both sides of the aisle. Rep. Litvack also said he expects there to be continued discussion of immigration issues, although not to the degree that immigration dominated last year’s legislative session. He believes there will again be attempts to repeal the laws granting in-state tuition to undocumented students and allowing undocumented immigrants to receive a driver privilege card.

Rep. Litvack highlighted economic development and quality of life issues as being of the highest priority to the Democratic Caucus. He anticipates the Democrats will be working on legislation intended to improve air quality, and considering Veterans’ issues, including access to mental health and job training. He also expects further discussion of public employees, especially how to attract and retain quality employees in light of the changes to the Utah Retirement System passed in the 2010 legislative session. Finally, the budget will continue to be a major point of discussion. Although we are in better economic times now than we have been in recent years, the economy is still recovering and the legislature will again be faced with difficult decisions around the budget.

ASPA would like to thank Sen. Mayne and Rep. Litvack for taking the time to share their insights and thoughts on the upcoming 2012 General Legislative Session.