

Some gifts, some coal from state Legislature

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The Michigan Legislature recently wrapped up its 2007-08 session and members have gone home for the holidays.

The end of the session included some nice presents under the tree, but also a few lumps of coal in Michigan residents' stockings.

Among the good things:

- Lawmakers postponed making a decision on whether to give Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan the changes it wants to expand its reach in the individual market.

The proposed legislation blasted through the House last year, crept through the Senate this year, thanks to state Sen. Tom George, R-Texas Township, who chairs that chamber's Health Policy Committee, and went to conference committee. Fortunately, lawmakers, possibly recognizing the complex nature of the legislation and its unintended -- or, perhaps, intended consequences -- opted not to move it this session. It will have to be re-introduced in the next session, when senators, at least, will already know its ramifications.

- Tax credits totaling \$335 million to help attract high-tech battery development for the automotive industry were approved.
- "Promise Zones," public-private partnerships for qualifying Michigan school districts, modeled after The Kalamazoo Promise's college scholarship program, were approved by state lawmakers.

The bad stuff:

- Michigan lawmakers still cannot agree on a smoking ban in bars and restaurants. The Republican-controlled Senate wants an overall ban. The Democratic House wants exemptions for casinos in the city of Detroit. We say ban smoking, with no exemptions for political buddies of Detroit Democrats.
- Michigan roads aren't getting any better. But state lawmakers can't work up the intestinal fortitude to boost funding for roads and bridges above the 19-cents-a-gallon gas tax the state now levies -- the same level it was in 1997.

Nearly everyone agrees that Michigan's roads and bridges are reaching a critical point. They're dangerous and are creating a disincentive for big employers -- especially those who rely on highway infrastructure to do business -- to locate here.

In the next session, which begins next month, we want to see the state Legislature -- despite a House full of inexperienced representatives -- get its act together and finish the work that the current Legislature couldn't get done.