

denver and the west

State tacks on the fees

This session, 40 bills boosting charges \$40 million by next year won support on both sides of the aisle.

By Jessica Fender
The Denver Post

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Frauke Peterson of Germany gets advice from teacher Kelly Johnson during a class at Colorado School of Healing Arts. Among the new fees is a \$120 charge for massage therapists to get a state license. (Joe Amon, The Denver Post)

If you're a massage therapist, nursing-facility operator, car insurer or plaintiff in a civil court case, life will get a little more expensive following this legislative session.

While lawmakers can't raise taxes without a vote of the people, they can — and did to the tune of nearly \$40 million by 2009 — raise dozens of fines and fees to cover costs.

Many of the most expensive increases were bipartisan affairs, though Republicans needle Democrats over ever-rising charges.

Rep. Cory Gardner, R-Yuma, voted against many of the increases and pointed out that an economic downturn is a tough time to raise rates.

"Even if there are legitimate fees that were put in place, by the time you add up to \$40 million, . . . that starts to hurt Colorado pretty significantly," Gardner said.

"That's a lot of money that Coloradans are paying without having any say about it."

The state's 6,000 massage therapists — soon to include Colorado School of Healing Arts student Julie Stevenson — can expect to pay the state about \$120 every two years for the right to practice their trade.

Stevenson welcomes the new registration and fee program, which will lend her industry credibility.

"It's the kind of credibility massage therapists deserve," said Stevenson, lying Wednesday in a darkened room while a class partner massaged her neck.

"It's really, really worth it. Having that is like insurance for me."

State rules say lawmakers should use fee money to provide services to those who pay them, and

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that's what the legislature did this session, said Assistant Majority Leader Terrance Carroll, D-Denver.

"You can't have government on the cheap. Many people are asking for those services," Carroll said. "It's typical for the Republicans to be screaming and yelling over fee increases when the majority pass with bipartisan support."

Lawmakers approved 40 bills that would boost fines and fees anywhere from an additional 75 cents for a birth certificate to a new \$67,000 quality-assurance fee imposed on the state's 155 nursing-home facilities. Many of those bills now await the signature of Gov. Bill Ritter.

Fees on nursing facilities, home-care providers, civil court filers and overweight vehicles will bring in a combined \$19.7 million in 2008-09 and \$25.5 million in 2009-10.

All passed by wide margins in the House, although some faced closer calls among senators, as Senate Republicans accused Democrats of going on a "fee spree" during the session.

Lawmakers said "no" to a number of fees as well, most noticeably higher car-registration rates that could have cost drivers up to \$97 a vehicle. Charges for funeral-home licenses and increased marriage-license fees also fell by the wayside.

And while higher costs could cause heartburn for some, Stevenson doesn't mind them so much

from her spot on the massage table at her Lakewood school.

She's glad Colorado is joining the 32 other states that register members of her industry.

"I think it will be a good thing," she said.

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Paying more

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