

Assembly approves bill on Dane County zoning rules

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The state Assembly today approved legislation 57-34 that would ease the process for Dane County towns to opt out of the county's zoning rules.

Dems this week delayed a vote on AB 109 until today, raising concerns the bill could nix eight currently scheduled citizen votes on whether their towns should withdraw from Dane County's zoning rules.

But that could only happen if the Senate approves the bill before those April 18 annual town meetings. A spokeswoman for Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald said the current legislative calendar doesn't have the chamber returning until the first week of May.

Rep. Terese Berceau, D-Madison, said the bill "isn't going to go anywhere in time" to cancel those votes.

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"Ain't gonna happen now, so you're doing this for an exercise in ego," Berceau said.

Still, Rep. Keith Ripp, R-Lodi, said the bill is necessary because "Dane County has intruded on townships" by not doing a comprehensive review of its zoning for decades.

"If they would do it, we don't need this bill," he said.

And Rep. Ed Brooks, R-Reedsburg, said the bill boosts local control by letting townships decide their future. He noted it's been 80 years since Dane County did any comprehensive changes on zoning and "they don't wanna see one."

He said the decision will ultimately be up to citizens, likening it to President Obama's health care promise.

"If you're happy with your zoning, you can keep your zoning," Brooks said.

The bill originally removed the ability of citizens to directly vote on the issue, putting the decision on the hands of their town board members. Ripp noted the bill was amended to ensure people could vote on those questions at referendums or special meetings — but not annual town meetings.

But Rep. Mark Spreitzer, D-Beloit, said that amendment still could've cancelled the eight votes scheduled for April 18 at the towns' annual meetings. That's because it would prevent people from voting on the question at annual meetings and because town leadership wouldn't have enough time to schedule a special meeting on the same day.

Rep. Scott Allen, R-Waukesha, also spoke out against the bill, calling it "bad legislation" by putting those questions in low-turnout meetings rather than a high-turnout annual meeting.

"To take advantage of low voter turnout and low voter participation is simply wrong and is simply bad legislation," he said.

Allen was one of a handful of Republicans to vote against the bill.

But Brooks said the "annual meeting is overrated" because it doesn't need public noticing if it's held on the third Tuesday of April. He also said people would go to a special meeting if it's on an important issue.

"If you have a local issue, people will turn out," he said.