

Senate to take up high-cap wells bill tomorrow morning

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The Senate will reconvene tomorrow morning to continue discussion on a high-capacity wells bill after Dems objected to a third reading of the legislation this evening.

Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald proposed the 8 a.m. meeting time, which begins two hours before a Joint Finance Committee public hearing on the budget in West Allis. Senators voted 19-13 approving the recess, over some JFC Dems' objections.

The Senate today also approved a GOP amendment to the bill that would allow high-capacity well owners to face fewer state regulations, which likely clears the way for adoption by the Assembly in the future.

The amendment, from freshman Sen. Pat Testin, R-Stevens Point, would concentrate one of the study areas on bodies of water that he said have seen the biggest draw down in the Central Sands region that he represents.

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While the amendment ultimately passed 19-13 along party lines, Dems spoke up against it, including Sen. Lena Taylor, who said introducing such an amendment would've been appropriate in committee.

A Senate committee last week held a paper ballot vote that advanced the bill onto the Senate floor. The five-member committee did not meet in person for discussion, and passed the bill 3-2 along party lines.

Taylor, D-Milwaukee, lectured her Senate colleagues on decency and allowing bills to move forward without "being adequately debated in committee."

She also questioned Testin, asking him why this has to be done today.

He replied that “it’s on the floor today.”

But Taylor countered that the “truth of the matter is we don’t have to do this today,” adding that “sometimes you rush things and make it worse.”

Earlier, during discussion on the bill, Fitzgerald told senators that he shared some responsibility for the paper ballot, because he wanted to get the bill on the floor. Still, he said it was needed to provide certainty to the ag industry.

“If we were to move away from the idea of these farmers being able to have the ability to raise these crops, I’m not sure what would happen,” Fitzgerald said. “I’m not sure where this would go.”

But Sen. Fred Risser, D-Madison, complained the bill “privatizes public water” by removing DNR oversight of the replacement, reconstruction and transfer of high-capacity wells.

The Senate also steam-rolled Dem-backed amendments to the bill, including a provision that would sunset existing well permits over time and another that would require the assessment of the cumulative effect of high-capacity wells in the area.

See Testin’s amendment:

<https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/raw/proposal/2017/a0217>