

JFC approves three extraordinary session bills along party lines

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The Joint Finance Committee voted 12-4 along party lines early Tuesday to approve three GOP-authored extraordinary session bills after making several tweaks to the legislation.

The bills, which the Legislature plans to take to the floor today after they were introduced Friday, would make a series of changes to state law to give the Legislature more oversight of the incoming Tony Evers administration and say over the decisions of AG-elect Josh Kaul.

Dems slammed the bills as a power grab, while Republicans insisted they were just an attempt to balance the power between the executive branch and the Legislature.

“You rig the system when you win and you rig the system when you lose,” said Rep. Chris Taylor, D-Madison. “How is it you lose an election and you add more power after you lose?”

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But JFC Co-chair John Nygren, R-Marinette, said 19 of the 45 proposals before the committee were either in the 2017-19 budget, would codify existing administrative rule, or update existing state law to reflect court decisions or federal law.

He said Gov.-elect Tony Evers didn't this fall saying he would reject the waiver of a work requirement under the Medicaid program. But he is bringing it up now. If Evers really wants to work with Republicans, who will continue to control both houses of the Legislature next session, it would be best if they're as equals.

“Him being able to undo what we've done with a simple signature is not a co-equal branch of government,” Nygren said.

Republicans originally released five bills, including one that incorporated all of the provisions in the other four. But the committee didn't take up the omnibus legislation.

JFC also didn't take up a bill that would move the 2020 presidential primary off the April ballot and to a new election day in March. That bill also included two provisions on absentee voting. Those pieces on absentee voting were instead added to another extraordinary session bill.

Nygren said he doesn't believe Republicans have the votes to approve the primary change and he believes GOP leaders don't intend to take up the bill on the floor today.

Other changes the committee made to the legislation include:

- *removing a provision that would've exempted the Department of Public Instruction from administrative rules requirements that are part of the package. The state Supreme Court has ruled that DPI isn't subject to changes Republicans made to the administrative rules process in 2011, though a conservative group is now pushing the justices to reconsider that decision. Some conservatives had raised objections to the provision exempting DPI because it would've codified that earlier Supreme Court ruling.

- *keeping a window of about two weeks for in-person absentee voting as proposed in the original package. But the committee deleted restrictions on the time of day it can be offered and specified that clerks or election commissioners could offer more than one voting location. The GOP motion also made clear that in-person absentee voting can be offered every day over the two-week period. Previously, Republicans limited the hours it can be offered and prohibited clerks from offering it on Sunday. But a federal judge issued an injunction banning enforcement of those restrictions.

- *modifying a provision that would give the Joint Committee on Legislative Organization the authority to appoint a special counsel to say the body would have to make the appointment in the consultation with the Department of Justice.

- *adding a prohibition on local governments from using their own workforce or contract with another political subdivision for a local road or bridge project funded, in whole or in part, with state money. The provision also says local governments would have to bid out any local road or bridge project funded with state money.