

Assembly fails to override three budget vetoes

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Assembly GOP lawmakers failed to meet the two-thirds threshold to override three of Gov. Tony Evers' budget vetoes. After more than two hours of heated debate the chamber voted along party lines.

The trio of override votes received the support of all 62 Republican members present in the chamber, falling two votes short of the threshold after two Dems and one GOP member were excused from the floor session. All 34 Dems voted against the overrides.

The opening period of floor debate centered on a veto of a provision that would have allowed the Building Commission to authorize up to \$25 million in bonding for a regional crisis center in northwest Wisconsin.

Evers said in his veto message he objected to that use of funds, because it did not follow the "normal enumeration process that has been established by the Building Commission." He instead directed the funding to support the expansion of the Mendota Juvenile Treatment Center in Dane County.

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Republicans knocked that decision in a series of floor speeches, noting a "clear need" for a facility in the northwestern part of the state.

"This isn't a partisan issue," said Rep. Gae Magnafici, R-Dresser, adding law enforcement officers from across the political spectrum told her the center was their top priority. "With such wide support, I simply cannot understand why the governor and my Democratic colleagues are choosing to stonewall our efforts."

Rep. Rob Shafsholt, meanwhile, slammed the gov's veto as "asinine." The New

Richmond Republican said it was “outrageous” that if his constituents were ordered into mental health treatment, they would have to be transported in handcuffs in the back of a police cruiser for eight hours to the Madison treatment center with no plan to bring them back.

Assembly Minority Leader Gordon Hintz was the only Dem to speak during the allotted 40-minute period, but his comments focused on gun violence and Evers’ call for a special session.

The second veto targeted by Republicans stripped \$10 million across the biennium to up Medicaid reimbursement rate increases for physicians and behavioral health providers.

But Evers said those funds had been removed from a DHS allocation intended to tackle the state’s behavioral health provider shortage. He vetoed the measure and instead directed the department to use its base-level resources to boost Medicaid reimbursement rates for physicians and behavioral health professionals “as soon as is practical.”

Assembly Speaker Robin Vos ripped the gov’s veto and Dems’ unified opposition to the first veto override in an impassioned floor speech, accusing Dems of choosing “to put the party and politics over the people that you represent.”

“You want to increase funding for Medicaid, you want to help the poor, but here you are with an opportunity where only two of you have to have some courage,” he said. “And with the past as a prologue to the present none of you will stand up to the governor.”

Rep. Deb Kolste, D-Janesville, fired back that the GOP-controlled Joint Finance Committee cut more than \$86 million from Evers’ mental health budget while Hintz circulated a document to reporters laying out those cuts.

The last veto removed several requirements for social worker, counselor, therapist and psychologist certification training centers in order to receive state funding.

“I am broadly supportive of measures to increase qualified health care providers in the state,” Evers wrote in his veto message. “However, I object to the specificity outlined in the provision.”

Milwaukee Dem Rep. Evan Goyke spoke first on the veto, matching Vos’ for passion

in a floor speech in which he also highlighted JFC cuts to Evers' mental health proposals.

“Not one word was mentioned, not one ounce of courage, not one little bit of guts from some members of the Republican caucus to get up and say no to that,” he said. “They went along with it, they voted for it, and now today they have an entirely different position.”

But Rep. Mary Felzkowski, R-Irma countered the measure would have greatly benefited northern and rural Wisconsin and called the veto a “direct attack on the areas of the state that did not elect him.”

Assembly Majority Leader Jim Steineke, R-Kaukauna, told reporters ahead of the floor session that Republicans didn't plan to hold override votes during next Tuesday's floor session, adding it was “certainly possible after the first of the year.”