

Assembly passes bill to address impact of COVID-19 pandemic

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The state Assembly, often deeply divided on big issues, today overwhelmingly backed legislation to help Wisconsin deal with the impact of COVID-19 as leaders praised the measure as an example of what can be done when lawmakers work together.

The legislation, approved 97-2, would give the Joint Finance Committee new powers to redirect money to help cover expenses related to COVID-19, help Wisconsin qualify for more federal Medicaid money and suspend a one-week waiting period before those laid off can begin collecting unemployment benefits.

The only members to vote against the bill were Milwaukee Dems Jonathan Brostoff and Marisabel Cabrera. The pair in a statement said they opposed the bill, because it didn't go far enough to help working people, saying it was "little more than scraps."

While Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, and Minority Leader Gordon Hintz, D-Oshkosh, praised the bipartisan talks that produced the bill, they also bemoaned what could've been.

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Vos said Republicans wanted to freeze state spending in the second year of the budget, which begins July 1, but Dems refused to make the hard decisions now despite signs state revenues are going to drop dramatically.

"There is no doubt in my mind we're going to have to come back at some point and deal with the economic carnage to deal with our decision to not freeze spending," Vos said.

Meanwhile, Hintz, who was the only Dem voting in person, said those who believe the state's challenges with COVID-19 will begin to recede once the gov's public health emergency declaration ends May 11 are mistaken. He predicted the chamber would be back to deal with additional issues. Hintz also knocked a late amendment from Vos, who described the changes as technical.

Hintz insisted they were the result of a late lobbying effort.

"I got those calls, too, but those are the same kind of politics that should be left out of this," Hintz said.

The Senate plans to take up the bill tomorrow.

The virtual session — a first for the Assembly — was notable for its lack of debate and lengthy roll call votes as members were polled one-by-one compared to the usual process of simply pushing a button at their desks.

The vote on final passage lasted 8 minutes, 53 seconds as Chief Clerk Pat Fuller went through the lawmakers participating virtually one-by-one before then moving to the legislators there in person.

Dems proposed three amendments that were taken up and shot down without debate. They would have:

- *changed language in the bill referencing the gov's public health emergency declaration; Dems said it would ensure provisions in the bill would last beyond when the order expires next month;

- *added to the bill provisions from a bill Dems introduced to move the rest of the 2020 elections to voting primarily by mail. The amendment included waiving the voter ID requirements for the 2020 elections, providing \$1 million to the Elections Commission and spending \$3 million on a public information campaign.

- *added various provisions such as \$59 million for the UW System, \$5 million for the Department of Tourism, language to help child care providers receive federal grant funding and \$30 million for WEDC to assist small businesses affected by the public health emergency.

Meanwhile, the Assembly voted along party lines to approve the amendment Vos proposed.

The amendment, according to LFB, would:

*allow certain health care professionals formerly credentialed in Wisconsin to temporarily practice without a current credential in certain circumstances. That's a change from the negotiated bill, which called for the Department of Safety and Professional Services to issue temporary credentials to those who previously held one in Wisconsin.

*allow municipalities and counties to mutually agree to waive or reduce penalties and interest for the late payment of taxes due to hardship before Oct. 1. It changed language included in the bill originally.

*change language in a worker's compensation section for first responders. The provision assumes a first responder's COVID-19 injury was the result of that person's employment. The amendment adds that the person must have been exposed to others with confirmed cases in the course of employment.

See an LFB memo on Vos' amendment:

<https://www.wispolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/200414Amendment.pdf>