

Guv's office, speaker spar over plans for COVID-19 legislation

Posted on Wednesday, Nov 18, 2020

Less than a day after Gov. Tony Evers' staff asked GOP legislative leaders for their input on a COVID-19 bill, Assembly Speaker Robin Vos instead laid out a list of priorities to reporters first.

The priorities include better contact tracing and providing liability protections for businesses and others.

Vos told reporters yesterday his caucus doesn't have legislation drafted, but hoped to sit down with the guv to talk about ideas for a compromise package. He said many of the ideas the Evers administration included in its bill draft were a "rehash" of what the Legislature did in the spring and said Assembly Republicans wanted to bring new ideas to the table.

Evers spokeswoman Britt Cudaback, meanwhile, slammed Republicans for going to the media with their ideas rather than accepting the administration's offer to negotiate a package.

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)

"It's shameful that Republicans are watching our state face an unprecedented crisis and would rather continue playing politics than work with the governor to do what's best for the people of our state," Cudaback tweeted.

Shortly before noon yesterday, Vos' office announced a news conference "about new legislative initiatives to help slow the spread of COVID-19."

The guv's office then released a draft of the bill it sent to Vos, incoming Senate Majority Leader Devin LeMahieu and their top aides late yesterday. Among other things, the bill calls for a moratorium on evictions and continuing the suspension of

a one-week waiting period before the jobless can begin collecting unemployment.

Along with the draft, Evers' office released a copy of an email from Legislative Affairs Director Zach Madden late yesterday to Vos, R-Rochester, LeMahieu, R-Oostburg, and their top aides offering to walk legislative staff through the bill and answer questions today. He also asked the leaders and their aides to meet with their caucuses and finalize the bill with the gov on Friday.

Vos said he had hoped to have something negotiated by Thanksgiving, but "We'll have to see if that's possible based on the actions that" Evers' office took. His hope was to be able to pass something in December.

He was also dismissive of a question whether the gov's office and legislative leaders would be able to work out a deal considering both suggested the other side had already undercut those efforts.

"For people who read WisPolitics and people who are kind of political insiders, that's an interesting question," Vos said. "For the rest of the state, they want to say 'Don't focus on who's fighting with who, don't focus on who's going to meet what time, when, where.' Nobody cares. What they want is they want us to find answers where we can actually move the ball forward and help those dealing with the coronavirus."

Vos, who insisted he wouldn't negotiate details of the COVID-19 bill through the media, laid out a string of Assembly GOP priorities.

The speaker, who owns rental properties, said he didn't support the gov's call to end evictions and questioned if the suspension of a one-week waiting period before those who lose their jobs can collect unemployment was still needed.

The Assembly GOP priorities include:

- *doubling the number of contact tracers;
- *improving access to rapid testing;
- *extending the National Guard deployment to help with testing;
- *and implementing a new program like a pilot in Minnesota that allows people to take tests at home.

Vos also said he was disappointed Evers' bill didn't address the state's troubled unemployment insurance system. The Department of Workforce Development announced today the backlog of weekly claims was down to 6.7 percent, compared

to 16 percent in late May. The backlog impacts 72,160 unique claimants with 121,639 issues requiring adjudication. Meanwhile, there continue to be a series of stories in the media about those who filed claims this spring and are still awaiting payment.

Vos suggested those who are unemployed and can't go back to their previous jobs be offered positions as contact tracers in addition to their unemployment payments. He also suggested allowing med school students to do the same for a semester.

He didn't provide specifics on the liability protections other than they would protect school districts, local governments and small businesses from potential lawsuits when trying to the best of their ability to implement safeguards against the spread of COVID-19.

Vos said he was "trying to put politics in the past," though he twice bemoaned what he said were Dem efforts during the campaign to "lie" about GOP efforts to address COVID-19.

State Sen. Jon Erpenbach, D-Middleton, knocked Republicans for "a total lack of leadership," noting the Legislature hasn't met since mid-April and "Robin Vos hasn't brought a thing to the table since."

"Ninety-two people have died since yesterday and Speaker Vos is still trying to blame Governor Evers," Erpenbach said. "As the Governor has been saying over and over again, his door has been open, it's the majority Republicans who continue to say no."

Watch Vos' news conference [here](#).

Evers' bill included \$466 million in spending the administration says would be needed to continue current pandemic response efforts in Wisconsin through April 1 without additional action from the federal government.

It also lists \$75 million in grants to small businesses.

The gov's office said both were meant as placeholders ahead of expected negotiations with GOP legislative leaders to gauge their support for the measures.

Beyond the money, the bill includes some two dozen proposals such as:
*requiring insurers to cover all telehealth services that would be otherwise be

covered if they were in person;

*allowing pharmacists to extend more prescription refills by 30 days, when safe to do so, through the end of 2021;

*ensuring health plans cover testing, diagnosis, treatment, prescriptions and vaccines

related to COVID-19;

*giving the state the authority to waive interest, penalties or payments on governmental loans and debt through the end of 2021;

*allowing the Department of Workforce Development to issue rules relaxing work requirements to qualify for unemployment through the end of 2021;

*allowing those on Social Security disability to concurrently receive unemployment; Wisconsin is currently one of two states where that is banned, according to the Evers administration.

See Evers' bill [here](#).

See the bill summary [here](#).

Note: This item was updated with additional details and reaction.