

Interview: LeMahieu sees Senate backing a slimmer COVID-19 package than Assembly GOP

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Incoming Senate Majority Leader Devin LeMahieu says Senate Republicans have created an outline for COVID-19 bill that includes some provisions similar to those in a bill outlined by Assembly Speaker Robin Vos.

But LeMahieu, R-Oostburg, told WisPolitics.com the Senate GOP outline doesn't include any appropriations and "definitely we're not going to have 50 provisions in ours."

The bill Vos, R-Rochester, released earlier this month included a string of provisions such as setting a deadline for state office buildings to reopen and state employees to return to work in person. It also included a provision to give the GOP-controlled Joint Finance Committee the power to transfer up to \$100 million from state agencies to pay for efforts to address the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another provision in the Assembly bill called for requiring school districts that provide virtual instruction to pay parents \$371. Sen. Steve Nass, R-Whitewater, this week released a list of demands before he'll support a COVID-19 bill that includes compensating parents whose children attend schools that have been mostly virtual since September.

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LeMahieu said the Senate GOP outline doesn't include such a provision.

He shared the outline with Gov. Tony Evers and Vos during a meeting earlier this week, and they're scheduled to meet again Monday.

LeMahieu has said Senate Republicans prefer to have the Evers administration repackage surplus Medicaid funds to pay for COVID-19 costs if the federal government fails to include new money for testing and tracing in the stimulus bill being negotiated in Congress. At the end of the third quarter, the Department of Health Services was projecting a \$289 million surplus in the Medicaid fund through mid-2021.

LeMahieu said in the interview the caucus still supports that approach, though Evers has said that's an unacceptable funding source. The gov told reporters in a call earlier this month those funds are meant to serve the state's most vulnerable in the Medicaid program.

"Our position still is if Jan. 1 comes and there's no new federal money, we still have the JFC 13.10 process where the governor can come to us and transfer money from the Medicaid surplus," said LeMahieu, who added the caucus was still finalizing language of a bill.

The COVID-19 bill is one of several priorities for Senate Republicans as LeMahieu prepares to formally take over as majority leader for departing Sen. Scott Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, after the Legislature reconvenes next month.

One of the additional priorities is legislation to address election regulations after President Trump challenged how absentee ballots were cast, processed and collected in Wisconsin. Trump has falsely claimed several times since Nov. 3 that he won Wisconsin even though Joe Biden received 20,682 more votes and the state's electoral votes were cast for the former vice president on Monday.

Last night, Trump tweeted "We won Wisconsin big. They rigged the vote!" in response to a tweet featuring testimony from Jim Troupis, who represented the president in his unsuccessful suit to throw out 221,000 votes in Dane and Milwaukee counties. The video was from a Senate hearing chaired by U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Oshkosh.

In his interview, LeMahieu begrudgingly acknowledged Biden's victory saying, "As of now, yes, Joe Biden won Wisconsin." Still, he claimed irregularities and "questionable practices."

He said legislation is needed to restore confidence in Wisconsin's elections. LeMahieu attributed that lack of faith to things like Madison's "Democracy in the

Park” absentee ballot collection events and reports that residents of nursing homes may have been pressured by staff in how they voted.

“These are probably valid votes in Milwaukee County, but when their early votes turn in at 2 a.m., that breeds mistrust in the public,” LeMahieu said.

LeMahieu co-sponsored legislation this session to allow clerks to begin processing absentee ballots on the Monday before an election. That bill passed the Assembly, but the GOP-run Senate failed to take it up. LeMahieu said he’d like to see that come back. He noted his caucus was still discussing what it would like to see in a bill to overhaul election laws.

He also raised concerns the Elections Commission has exceeded its authority in its advice to local clerks. The Trump campaign has challenged that advice, including allowing clerks to fill in missing information for witnesses to absentee ballots, but has yet to persuade a court on its view.

“Hopefully the governor understands that confidence in our elections is vitally important,” LeMahieu said.

LeMahieu said other priorities in the coming year will be to look at the dozens of bills that cleared the Assembly this session, but failed to pass the Senate after COVID-19 led to the cancellation of the final regular floor period that had been scheduled in March.

LeMahieu also said he expects the Legislature to wrap up its work on the budget by the second or third week of June, though he acknowledged getting a budget signed into law by Evers before the new fiscal year begins July 1 is no guarantee.

The COVID package, election bill and budget will all be tests for LeMahieu’s leadership of the Senate GOP caucus, which has been helmed by Fitzgerald since 2007. Fitzgerald has long been viewed as a leader who allowed his caucus to largely find consensus on an issue before closing the deal and pushing legislation to the floor rather than trying to push his members in a direction.

LeMahieu, who will have a larger majority than Fitzgerald did in 2019-20, said he plans to take a similar approach. The GOP caucus grew by two to 21 seats in the 33-member chamber after victories in a Green Bay and western Wisconsin seat.

“Obviously, I’m not Fitz. I’m a different person,” LeMahieu said. “But I think that

methodology works pretty well in the Senate, where we have some varying opinions on things. Trying to guide the caucus, but ultimately trying to make sure we can find consensus or close to consensus on issues is a very prudent way of managing Senate Republicans.”

[Listen to the interview here](#)