

Assembly approves banning mandatory COVID vaccines, stripping officials of power to ban meetings in houses of worship

Posted on Tuesday, Mar 23, 2021

The Assembly today approved a series of COVID-19 related bills along party lines that would ban mandatory vaccines against the virus and ban health officials from prohibiting public gatherings in places of religious worship to deal with the pandemic.

AB 23, which would strip state and local health officials of the power to require a vaccine, cleared 60-33. The Assembly added language to include any vaccine for any COVID-19 variant. The amended version of the bill now heads to the Senate.

Assembly Minority Leader Gordon Hintz, D-Oshkosh, said Republican efforts to put more power over dealing with the pandemic in the Legislature's lap are just political games that don't help the people of Wisconsin.

"That means don't take it out on the people of Wisconsin by doing measures that ultimately politicize what should be a public health response to this pandemic," Hintz said.

>> 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.](#)

Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, said Wisconsinites should be allowed to decide whether to take the vaccine for themselves.

"That is a simple argument to make," Vos said, adding he plans to take the vaccine soon.

The other bills:

AB 24, which cleared 61-33, would ban DHS and local health officials from forbidding public gatherings at places of worship due to COVID-19.

The bill now heads to the Senate for approval.

Republicans said they voted for the bill because the right to religious freedom must be guaranteed, and any bill that restricts the right of expression through worship goes against that constitutional right.

However, Dems argued the bill would prevent the government from guiding places of religious worship to keep people safe.

Rep. David Bowen, D-Milwaukee, said religious freedom is important to protect, but it is also important for places of worship to recognize people can practice their religion in a way that doesn't endanger them by gathering in-person en masse.

Majority Leader Jim Steineke, R-Kaukauna, said the government doesn't need to restrict churches and other places of worship because they know how to safely open their doors to the public without government interference.

"If you can't trust your pastors to do the right thing without government mandates, who do you trust?," Steineke asked. "And when you're allowing government to step in and take that away from people, it's just not right."

*AB 25, which would prevent employees from requiring workers to receive the vaccine as a condition of employment, cleared 59-35.

Rep. Sara Rodriguez, D-Brookfield, argued the bill, alongside today's other COVID bills, would undermine confidence in public health in the state.

"There is a reason why almost every health care organization has registered their disapproval of this bill," she said. "This bill does nothing to encourage vaccinations as a tool."

But Speaker Pro Tempore Tyler August, R-Lake Geneva, dismissed Dem opposition as hypocritical. He called the AB 25 a "worker freedom bill" and called it ironic that the GOP would pass it with total Dem opposition.

It now goes to the Senate, where lawmakers have yet to take up its sister bill, SB 5.

*SB 38, which would require Evers to submit a plan to the Legislature for when state employees will return to work in their offices, was approved 60-35.

Vos slammed Evers for not requiring all state employees to continue working because he said those who work in state government all have important jobs to do. He added forcing people like health care workers and prison officials to work while allowing state Capitol workers to go home was hypocritical.

“This is not something that the Legislature should have had to mandate on a governor. If he had been on top of things, he would have already put together a return to work plan,” Vos said.

Vos even said Evers could take credit for any plans to safely return to work created by the Legislature.

Rep. Christine Sinicki, D-Milwaukee, said Republicans should be ashamed to say state employees are not working. She said those state workers have been working hard from home since the beginning of the pandemic.

The bill now heads to the gov’s desk.