

Assembly passes bill to stop local governments using private money to pay for elections

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The Assembly passed today a bill that would bar local governments from using private money to cover election costs.

The bill passed along party lines in a 60-36, sending it to the Senate.

The Senate previously passed a similar bill by voice vote. But that amended version would ban donations entirely, while the Assembly bill would send the money to the Elections Commission to distribute evenly throughout the state.

AB 173 author Rep. Adam Neylon, R-Pewaukee, in an avail ahead of the floor session said he expects the Senate to take up the Assembly's version.

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The bill comes as similar complaints have been filed against Milwaukee, Kenosha, Racine and Green Bay over their use of private funds. Complaints target local officials and Elections Commission Administrator Meagan Wolfe, charging the communities "adopted and implemented private corporate conditions" on how the elections were run as a condition of using the money.

Rep. Mark Spreitzer, D-Beloit, said the bill would hurt local election efforts.

"This isn't a serious proposal based on facts, it's a conspiracy theory given statutory form," Spreitzer said. "It's an attempt to join the anti-voter movement across the country led by Republicans who know that when voters vote, Republicans lose."

Rep. Sue Conley, D-Janesville, argued the bill is "political overreach and short

sighted” because groups that offer grants rarely if ever offer funds without any stipulations attached.

“Why would we be so bold, Mr. Speaker, to tell cash-strapped municipalities that we don’t trust them enough to manage their own grant requests and decisions?” Conley asked.

A federal lawsuit seeking to bar the four communities and Madison from using the private money was rejected by a federal judge last fall. He ruled there was no explicit ban in state law on using the money, though he said it raised concerns.

Rep. Gae Magnafici, R-Dresser, said the bill would help restore confidence in the voting process.

“Election integrity is not a partisan issue,” she said. “After reading headlines about big cities across the state having privately funded elections, I myself questioned if this money could influence the process.”

“Let’s make sure I can confidently tell my constituents that out-of-state billionaires no longer have a say in our elections,” Magnafici added.