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Assembly revises COVID-19 bill again, sends it back to Senate

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The Assembly today passed an amended COVID-19 bill that reinserted some provisions stripped out by the Senate two weeks ago.

Lawmakers voted 58-34 along party lines on a pair of amendments before a party-line vote on final passage.

One of those amendments added back provisions that strip local government officials of their pandemic-related powers to restrict meetings at houses of worship and ban employers from being able to require a COVID-19 vaccine as a condition of employment.

The second gives the Joint Finance Committee oversight of federal COVID-19 relief funds.

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Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, said the first of those amendments "certainly is not something that is hyper-partisan."

"This is something we can all vote 'yes' on," he said. "And it's past time to get this done."

He also noted the amendment kept out provisions from the Assembly's original version that Senate lawmakers found controversial. Those included: requiring a two-thirds vote by school boards before providing virtual instruction instead of in-person learning; reopening the state Capitol; and mandating in-person work for state employees.

But in a media availability ahead of the floor session, Minority Leader Gordon Hintz,

D-Oshkosh, said sending the bill back to the Senate “is simply delaying further legislative action that is already 280-plus days late.”

He also criticized Vos, who he said “can’t quite come up with what the bill is going to be 45 minutes before we are going to take it up.” Assembly lawmakers came to the floor nearly two hours after originally scheduled after Republicans met in closed caucus.

“It seems to me that if you don’t have that together, maybe the best bet is to just take up the compromise version that we know has agreement,” Hintz said.

Today’s developments mark the latest effort to amend the state’s second legislative response to the COVID-19 pandemic after a first coronavirus package cleared the Legislature last April.

The Assembly early this month passed the package along party lines as Vos indicated he had good talks with Senate Majority Leader Devin LeMahieu, R-Oostburg, and was confident it would pass the other chamber.

But the Senate by voice vote passed an amended version backed by Gov. Tony Evers, who praised LeMahieu and said the Senate bill “reflects a good faith effort in compromise and bipartisanship.”

The amended bill now heads back to the Senate.