

Evers backs Senate version of COVID-19 bill but Assembly GOP leader knocks it

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Gov. Tony Evers today praised the Senate COVID-19 bill as a “good start” and urged the Assembly to pass the amended legislation so he can sign it “without delay.”

But Assembly Majority Leader Jim Steineke, R-Kaukauna, criticized the changes his Senate GOP colleagues made to the bill and cast doubt on its prospects in the other chamber.

In a statement after the Senate passed the bill, Evers also praised new Senate Majority Leader Devin LeMahieu, R-Oostburg.

“I’ve been grateful to work together with Republican Majority Leader LeMahieu to find common ground and pass a bill on COVID-19 that reflects a good faith effort in compromise and bipartisanship,” Evers said. “Although it’s not the COVID compromise we originally proposed, AB 1 as amended by the Senate is a good start to support our state’s response to this pandemic.”

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Last week, Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, announced his version of the COVID-19 bill and expressed confidence that the Senate would sign on. But LeMahieu suggested the Senate wasn’t on board with that version shortly before the Assembly went to the floor and passed it.

Multiple Assembly GOP sources told WisPolitics.com last week that Vos told Republican members during a closed-door caucus on Thursday that LeMahieu had gone behind his back to work out a deal with Evers.

During yesterday's committee hearing on the Senate version, LeMahieu said he'd been running language by the gov, but hadn't received a commitment on whether he would sign it.

Vos' office didn't immediately respond to a request for comment on Evers' call to pass the bill.

But Steineke said the Senate bill "fails to address so many of the issues we're hearing from constituents from all over the state. The message from our neighbors and communities has been loud and clear: we must open our state while keeping our vulnerable safe."

Steineke criticized the bill for dropping provisions that would've stripped government officials of their powers to restrict meetings at houses of worship to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic and banned employers from being able to require a vaccine as a condition of employment.

"We will continue to advocate for the priorities of our constituents over the next few weeks as we move towards a response to the Senate's actions during our next floor period later this month," Steineke said.

In a statement, LeMahieu pledged the Senate in the coming weeks will work to reopen schools, lift bans on gatherings and limit "the powers of local bureaucrats to shut down churches and main street businesses." But he focused on the liability protections included in the bill that passed today.

"We've heard from service organizations of all political stripes, from employers large and small, from critical industries around our state, that the most important factor in their ability to survive the future is protection against the threat of costly, unfounded litigation," LeMahieu said. "Today, the Senate passed a bill which can deliver a win for our state as we work to govern responsibly during this time of turmoil."

The state Senate overwhelmingly passed the revised COVID-19 bill.

The bill last week passed the Assembly along party lines. Today senators sent it back to the Assembly by voice vote after first attaching an amendment 29-2.

Sens. Chris Larson, D-Milwaukee, and Steve Nass, R-Whitewater, were the only two to oppose the substitute amendment. Sen. Lena Taylor, D-Milwaukee, didn't attend

today's floor period and didn't vote on the amendment.

A spokesman for Nass declined to comment, and instead referred WisPolitics.com to a statement the senator made yesterday in which he slammed the amendment as an attempt to "placate to Governor Evers" by removing GOP wish list items like a prohibition on mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations.

Larson on the floor said the bill should receive a "D-" grade for "doing the absolute minimum" to help Wisconsinites through the pandemic.

Instead, he touted a separate Dem substitute amendment to the bill that among other things would have expanded Medicaid funding through the Affordable Care Act and prevented school districts from losing funding if per-pupil counts dropped over the 2020-21 school year.

Justin Bielinski, a spokesman for Larson, told WisPolitics.com the Milwaukee Dem wanted to vote against the bill itself but since it passed by voice vote, opposing the substitute amendment was his only opportunity. He said the main sticking point was the bill's liability shield for schools and businesses.

Dems during the session also introduced two resolutions to the chamber: one that would mandate lawmakers wear masks; and another condemning the insurrection and storming of the U.S. Capitol last week by Trump supporters.

Sen. Tim Carpenter, D-Milwaukee, pleaded with his colleagues to pass the mask resolution as a sign of goodwill and leadership supporting public health.

"For wearing a simple mask that's less than a dollar, you can help an individual not test positive," he said. "I wish we could somehow put the politics behind us. You're not being emasculated. If anything, it shows your concern for other people."

Both resolutions ultimately failed along party lines.

See the bill:

<https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2021/related/proposals/ab1>

Read the Senate substitute amendment:

https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2021/related/amendments/ab1/ssa1_ab1