

Evers tells 'UpFront' he's not concerned about possible GOP lawsuit over federal COVID-19 aid spending

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Gov. Tony Evers says he's not concerned Republican lawmakers could take him to court over the distribution of \$3.2 billion in federal Covid-19 relief money.

The Dem governor recently vetoed GOP bills that would have directed how stimulus funds should be spent in Wisconsin. Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, recently said legal action against the governor would be a "last resort."

"This Legislature has made that part of their DNA, I think," Evers said in an interview aired Sunday on "UpFront," produced in partnership with WisPolitics.com. Conservatives have sued Evers several times in the more than two years he's been in office.

"We're in the right place. We just need to get money out the door. If they want to spend their time messing around with this, they'll be spending taxpayers' money to prevent taxpayers from getting money," Evers said. "It seems irrational to me, but we'll see what happens. We're always prepared."

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Evers said his priority is getting the money to people and businesses most impacted by the pandemic.

He said that would include small businesses, child care centers, and the tourism industry. Evers last week announced a \$420 million grant program for small businesses hurt in the pandemic.

“That’s an area that has been struggling right along, so there should be no disagreement on that, the need and frankly our ability to get it out the door as quickly as possible,” the governor said.

Evers also said he thinks demand for the COVID-19 vaccine is “plateauing,” rather than slowing, and the state is switching up its vaccine distribution strategy.

“What we do need to do now, and we’ve already started it, is reach out to historically hesitant communities,” Evers said.

“It is going to take some different strategies, frankly a lot of smaller efforts, all across the state,” he said.

In another segment, interim UW System President Tommy Thompson said he would “not accept failure” in efforts to get back to 75 percent in-person classes come fall.

“We’re going to succeed. I don’t accept failure. I want to make darn sure that we open up. The chancellors are on board,” Thompson said.

He said the goal of 75 percent in-person classes is about where the system was before the pandemic, given the number of classes that are normally taught online.

Thompson said vaccinations for students, faculty and staff would be key to efforts to reach 75 percent in-person learning.

“But if they are not vaccinated, we are going to keep testing, we’re going to make sure that our universities are as safe as they possibly can be,” he said.

Thompson, who was named interim president in June 2020, said he will continue to serve at the pleasure of the Board of Regents.

“I don’t know when they are going to start a search for the next president, but every one of (the Regents) tells me they like what I’m doing, want me to continue, for how much longer I don’t know. But it’ll be for a while,” Thompson said.

“UpFront” host Patrick Paolantonio asked if there was any chance Thompson would drop the interim title and stay on as president. Thompson said that was up to the Board of Regents.

“Are you interested?” Paolantonio asked.

"I'm not saying," Thompson responded.

Thompson also addressed the system's capital improvement needs. He said the recent collapse of a portion of the facade of Van Hise Hall on a Sunday afternoon "could easily have killed somebody." He said the event called attention to the condition of some UW buildings constructed in the 1950s, '60s, '70s and '80s. Thompson said some of those buildings need to be renovated or replaced.

The UW System is seeking \$1.2 billion in capital budget authority to renovate 2.9 million of the System's more than 67 million square feet, or 4 percent.

"We have had a dearth of money to repair and maintain and prevent decay in our buildings. We just haven't kept up with it, and I am not blaming anybody, not blaming the Legislature, not blaming the governor or the university. It just happens," Thompson said.

"Now what we need to do is, we need to take care of that problem, and fix it. And that's why they called me in. I'm a fixer," Thompson said.

See more from the program:

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