

Senate passes bill package dictating how to spend most fed relief dollars

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Senators nearly along party lines have passed an 11-bill package that would allocate federal pandemic relief funds.

The bills now go to the desk of Dem Gov. Tony Evers, who has already raised concerns about the proposals. The package yesterday passed the Assembly along party lines.

Those bills would spend \$1.1 billion to issue 10 percent property tax rebate checks to property owners in the state, \$500 million on expanding broadband internet access and \$150 million on improving long-term care facilities and over \$1 billion on other areas.

However, the Legislative Fiscal Bureau recently announced bills that would spend \$308 million rebuilding highways and bridges, \$53 million on modernizing the state's emergency communication system and \$500 million on paying down state debt likely violate rules attached to the federal funds.

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Taxpayers will likely be on the hook with the federal government for that money if Wisconsin breaks those rules in spending the federal dollars.

Dems ahead of the vote slammed Republicans for pushing through the bills that Evers is likely to veto and that very well may not even be allowed under U.S. Treasury guidance.

"What you're doing right now is not real," said Sen. Jon Erpenbach, D-West Point. "What we're doing right now is holding on to false hope that, if these bills become law, this stuff is going to happen. We just don't know that yet."

But Republicans shot back, arguing the bills were necessary because they give the legislative branch some say in how to spend the federal dollars that otherwise would go entirely to the executive branch for allocation.

Senate Majority Leader Devin LeMahieu, R-Oostburg, on the floor called federal spending ridiculous but suggested the GOP-controlled chamber should have a say in how to spend it so it's spent "as wisely as possible."

"We're trying to provide a roadmap, frankly, with this vast amount of money coming into the state," he said. "These are real ideas, real solutions. This package will benefit the state of Wisconsin."

Sen. Roger Roth, R-Appleton, joined Dems in opposition of the bills. And Sen. Steve Nass, R-Whitewater, also opposed all but two bills in the package.

Nass said last week he would only support the use of the stimulus money to directly help individuals and businesses harmed by COVID-19 and "excessive government restrictions" as well as to cover the costs of testing and vaccination efforts.

Roth, meanwhile, said, he supported some of the ideas in the bills. But he believed they should be debated in the totality of the budget and voting for them acknowledges "that we are willing to spend hundreds of millions of dollars we do not have, saddling future generations with yet more debt they can ill afford."