

GOP bill to make rioting a felony headed to Evers' desk

Posted on Tuesday, Jan 25, 2022

The Legislature approved a measure making it a Class I felony for anyone who intentionally participates in a riot that results in substantial damages to property or bodily injury.

The Senate signed off on the bill via a voice vote and the Assembly later approved it 59-34 along party lines, sending the bill Gov. Tony Evers' desk. Dems blasted their colleagues for what they said was an effort to suppress free speech while Republicans said the bill is about protecting community members looking to peacefully protest without restricting First Amendment rights.

A Class I felony carries a fine not more than \$10,000 or imprisonment not more than 3 years and 6 months, or both.

Dem Rep. Francesca Hong, D-Madison, said the move undermines core tenets of democracy, opens up peaceful protesters to the same punishments rioters face and amounts to a "declaration of war against the First Amendment."

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"The biggest threat to public safety is living in a country where this bill becomes law," she said.

GOP Rep. Barbara Dittrich, R-Oconomowoc, said she agrees with Hong that protecting First Amendment rights is important, but those aren't threatened by this bill.

"This behavior has got to stop," Dittrich said. "People deserve to feel safe in their workplace and in their homes without physical threats of violence."

Meanwhile, the Assembly in a 59-33 party-line vote signed off on a bill that would make it a Class I felony to damage or graffiti certain historical property.

Rep. Rick Gundrum, R-Slinger, said passing the bill sends a message to others that the right way to effect change is not through illegal behavior such as defacing public property, but through debate and the legal process. Dems did not speak on the measure.

Both efforts come after the violent protests in Kenosha and Madison in the summer of 2020 in the months after the deaths of George Floyd and the shooting of Jacob Blake.