

Brewers bill co-author outlines possible changes, calls ticket tax on baseball games 'nonstarter' for team

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A GOP architect of legislation to pump public money into maintenance of the Milwaukee Brewers stadium floated a series of expected changes the Senate could make to the legislation, including adding a ticket tax on non-baseball activities.

But state Rep. Rob Brooks, R-Saukville, said including Brewers games in a possible ticket tax would be a “nonstarter” for the team.

GOP Sen. Julian Bradley countered a ticket tax on all stadium events has been popular in his conversations with other lawmakers and constituents, challenging Brooks and fellow co-author Sen. Dan Feyen, R-Fond du Lac, on the idea during a public hearing Wednesday.

“Frankly, the Brewers didn’t elect you guys. You were elected by your constituents,” said Bradley, R-Franklin.

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Bradley indicated during the Senate Government Operations Committee hearing that he doesn’t support the bill and might not get to a yes even if some of his concerns are addressed.

One change Bradley said he wants to see is to align the team’s ownership stake in the stadium with its share of ongoing maintenance costs. Bradley said the team now owns 35 percent of American Family Field, but would account for just 21 percent of the \$646 million package.

Brooks jokingly pressed Bradley that he’d be a yes on the bill if that change was

made.

“That’s incorrect,” Bradley said.

The Franklin Republican also pressed Brewers Executive Vice President Rick Schlesinger on several issues, including rumors that the team would move to leave if the Legislature fails to approve the stadium bill this session. The team’s current lease runs through 2030.

“We would never breach the lease. Will will honor our obligations,” Schlesinger said.

The hearing came amid expectations that backers will have to assemble a bipartisan coalition to pass the bill in the Senate after it took Dem votes to clear the Assembly 69-27. Forty-seven Republicans and 22 Dems supported the bill in that chamber.

Feyen told WisPolitics ahead of the hearing that he continued to work on his caucus to line up support for the bill.

Feyen said the bill will probably need Dem votes to clear the Senate, which is controlled by Republicans 22-11. But he declined to say how many. He answered, “I wish I could answer that” when asked what problems some of his GOP colleagues had with the legislation.

“Some are just dead set against it no matter what I come up with,” he said.

Meanwhile, Sen. Tim Carpenter, D-Milwaukee, didn’t testify at Wednesday’s hearing, but registered against the bill. Fellow Milwaukee Dem Sen. Chris Larson has been critical of the legislation on numerous fronts, and the two make up half of the city’s Dem delegation in the Senate.

Carpenter told WisPolitics in a phone interview after the hearing he wants an audit of the stadium district’s finances before the state commits to spending public money on maintenance. He also ticked off several ideas he’d support to reduce the burden on taxpayers and possibly win him over on the bill. That includes having the Brewers or business community pick up more of the costs, diverting to taxpayers some of the proceeds from a future sale of the team, or even a lottery game that would direct proceeds to stadium maintenance.

“Anything that takes away some of the commitment on behalf of the taxpayers, but

I'm afraid they're not willing to do it," Carpenter said.

Brooks told the committee a clawback provision — such as the one Carpenter mentioned if the team is sold — would be problematic because “it doesn't happen in Major League Baseball.”

During his testimony before the committee, Brooks outlined a number of changes he expected the Senate to make. And he said backers purposefully didn't address those issues in the Assembly to make sure the Senate had a chance to put its imprint on the bill.

“I've learned in my nine years here that if I provided the Senate with the holy Bible, you would have amendments,” Brooks said.

Brooks said the changes he expects include:

- *using revenue from a non-Brewers ticket tax to lower the state's commitment. It's now \$411 million over the 27 years on the deal, while Milwaukee County and the city would put in \$135 million.

- *an unspecified payment in lieu of taxes to local governments for any development on the Brewers property that isn't related to the stadium. Brooks said the bill also could be amended to add a study committee to look at possible development at the site.

- *an audit of the finances of the district board that oversees the stadium.

- *tweaks to a provision in the bill to provide \$25 million to winterize the stadium so it could be used for more off-season events.

- *a change in the makeup of the board that oversees the stadium. The bill currently calls for four members picked by Gov. Tony Evers, two members each from the Assembly speaker and Senate majority leader, and one person appointed by the gov from a list of people the team provides.

Sen. Kelda Roys, D-Madison, called the board composition problematic, particularly since Milwaukee County and the city would make up a quarter of the funding for the project but get no slots on the board.

Roys, who called herself “skeptical but open-minded” on the bill, said she also had a

problem with the bill not giving the minority party in the Legislature an appointment to the board.