

UW Regents reverse course, approve deal with Vos

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The Universities of Wisconsin Board of Regents Wednesday evening reversed course and approved a deal with Assembly Speaker Robin Vos to curtail DEI positions in exchange for financial priorities that total some \$800 million.

The 11-6 vote came after the board rejected the same proposal 9-8 four days earlier. But President Karen Walsh, Vice President Amy Blumenfeld Bogost and Jennifer Staton, a student regent, flipped their stances and supported the deal.

Ahead of the vote, Walsh sought to assure members that the university isn't walking away from its commitment to students and staff of all backgrounds. She also pledged to personally contribute to a fund required under the deal to recruit a professor to the Madison campus to teach conservative thought.

"This proposal does not put that in jeopardy," she said of the overall plan. "We are not turning away from that core value," Walsh said.

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The heart of the agreement with Vos includes an agreement to sign off on pay raises for UW employees that were funded in the budget, but have been blocked by a joint committee that the Rochester Republican co-chairs. It also includes releasing \$32 million million in state funding for the university and approving a host of building projects, including one at Whitewater, Vos' alma mater.

In exchange, the resolution approved Wednesday evening freezes the number of diversity, equity and inclusion positions — including those currently vacant — through Dec. 31, 2026. A third of those positions — 43 jobs — would be realigned to focus on academic and student success or left unfilled through attrition. Other provisions in the resolution include a cap on the number of overall employees, a

commitment to eliminate the use of diversity statements in admission and a pledge not to renew a program at the Madison campus that seeks to recruit diverse faculty.

Another provision vows to seek donations to create an endowed chair at UW-Madison to focus on “conservative political thought, classical economic theory, or classical liberalism.”

“We finally have turned the corner and gotten real reforms enacted,” Vos wrote on X after the vote. “Republicans know this is just the first step in what will be our continuing efforts to eliminate these cancerous DEI practices on UW campuses.”

Evers said he disagreed with the regents’ decision and vowed to make “damn sure” those who promised to continue DEI efforts on campuses and to make them welcoming to everyone live up to that pledge. He also took a shot at Vos and GOP lawmakers, accusing them of doing nothing to advance legislatively the provisions in the deal the regents approved.

“This exercise has been about one thing—the relentless political tantrums, ultimatums, and threats of retribution by legislative Republicans, most especially Speaker Robin Vos, his negotiation-by-bullying tactics, and general disdain for public education at every level,” Evers said.

Many of the regents who spoke Wednesday bemoaned the situation they were put in by Vos and GOP lawmakers, saying it was inappropriate for the Legislature to hold up pay raises and funding for building projects that are widely supported.

John Miller, an appointee of Dem Gov. Tony Evers, said he would vote against the proposal just like he had on Saturday because he feared that it sets a precedent that the Legislature can use funding to enact concessions from the university.

“I fear that acceptance of this tactic will only embolden its adherents, leading to a never-ending cycle of brinkmanship,” he said.

Staton, meanwhile, ripped into Vos. The non-traditional member on the board served in the U.S. Army from 2007-14, including a stint as a combat medic while deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Now a student at UW-Parkside, she knocked Vos for dismissing DEI as “division, exclusion and indoctrination” and calling it one of the most important issues facing the nation.

“What rock is he living under?” said Staton, another Evers appointee. “He has lost touch with how people are actually living.”

Shortly after Saturday’s vote, Vos declared he was done negotiating with the regents and the deal they had rejected was his best, final offer. The board then met in closed session on Tuesday to discuss the proposal before calling Wednesday evening’s meeting.

Senate President Chris Kapenga, R-Delafield, also suggested Saturday’s vote could be used against the unconfirmed regents when they come before the body for a confirmation vote. Those who originally voted no and are still awaiting a vote are Blumenfeld Bogost, Miller and Wachs.

The first sign the board would flip positions came as Blumenfeld Bogost co-sponsored the resolution after voting no on Saturday.

Ahead of the vote, Dem lawmakers implored the board to again reject the package. Meanwhile, state Superintendent Jill Underly, a member of the board through her elected position, had urged the regents to delay the vote while she is overseas on vacation.

But her absence didn’t impact the overall vote with the three flips. A spokesperson said before the meeting that Underly had “very inconsistent internet access” and was unavailable at the scheduled meeting time.

Blumenfeld Bogost, who participated in the virtual meeting from Thailand, said she changed her position after hearing from more stakeholders. She said the pay raise is much needed for UW employees.

“We simply can’t ignore the immense challenge facing our university,” said Blumenfeld Bogost, an Evers appointee.

UW President Jay Rothman acknowledged “compromise can be extraordinarily difficult” and not everyone will be happy with the deal. He also noted the commitments in the resolution are conditions on legislative action.

“Given the circumstances, this is good for our students, our universities, and the state of Wisconsin,” Rothman wrote on X.