

Vos: Republicans plan DEI audit to root out programs in state government

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Assembly Speaker Robin Vos says GOP lawmakers early next year will OK an audit of DEI practices in state government, highlighting his next target after curtailing positions at UW.

The Rochester Republican told WisPolitics in a year-end interview that GOP lawmakers in early 2025 will then use the results of the audit as the foundation for their efforts to root out the programs within state agencies. Vos added Republicans will use their power to set spending and employee levels for state agencies to help accomplish the task, which is sure to face pushback from Dem Gov. Tony Evers.

Among other things, Vos wants the Legislative Audit Bureau to detail how the practices are used and if there are questions over whether existing programs are constitutional.

Vos rejected the suggestion that Republicans are trying to eliminate diversity at the university or in the state workforce.

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“We want people of every background, every ethnicity, every possible combination of people to be able to work in our state,” Vos said in yesterday’s interview. “But we want them to be judged on how well they’ll do the job. Are they the best candidate for the job? Are they the most qualified? Are they somebody who has the experience to be able to get it done?”

Britt Cudaback, a spokesperson for Evers, earlier this week dinged Vos after he vowed to continue fighting diversity, equity and inclusion in state government.

“We agree with the private sector—including our state’s largest employers, WMC, and local chambers of commerce—and will continue our efforts notwithstanding the small-minded objections of legislative Republicans,” she posted on X.

Vos earlier this month reached a deal with UW officials in which he agreed to a host of financial priorities for the university in exchange for a freeze on DEI positions as well as overall jobs within the system. The university’s portion of the deal — which includes reallocating a third of the jobs now under the DEI header — is contingent upon legislative action.

The Joint Committee on Employment Relations, which Vos co-chairs, met the first deadline this week by approving pay raises for UW employees. The deal also calls for the Joint Finance Committee to release \$32 million in state aid to UW and to approve a series of bonding projects. In all, the package totals \$800 million in new state money for the university.

Vos said the Legislature will first take up legislation included in the deal that would set new standards for guaranteed admissions to UW and allow the system to keep more of the money sent to Wisconsin as part of a tuition reciprocity agreement with Minnesota. Vos said the Legislature will wait for both bills to become law early next year before releasing other funds.

The deal sets a Feb. 29 deadline for the Legislature to complete its obligations outlined in the agreement.

Senate President Chris Kapenga, R-Delafield and a co-chair of JCOER, voted against the pay raises and has indicated he wants more extensive changes to DEI before signing off on additional funding for UW. Meanwhile, Senate Majority Leader Devin LeMahieu, R-Oostburg, wasn’t part of Vos’ negotiations with UW officials, and some have questioned whether the Senate GOP caucus will support the bonding components of the package.

Kapenga posted on X late yesterday: “I was a ‘no’ vote on the latest UW spending not only because DEI needs to die immediately but because of wasteful capital spending on vanity projects. An extra \$100,000 per student per year for DECADES to fund a new engineering building is a terrible deal for taxpayers.”

Vos said he believes LeMahieu and Joint Finance Co-chair Howard Marklein, R-Spring Green, are on board and was confident that the package would pass.

“I think they appreciate the fact that we were able to get something through,” Vos said. “It’s a compromise package. It’s not going to accomplish everything that I want. It doesn’t accomplish everything that it sounds like some senators want, but I think is a reasonable middle ground.”

Vos also said in the interview that Assembly Republicans plan to introduce bills early next year that would ask voters to impose new restrictions on abortion beyond the state’s current ban after 20 weeks and to implement a medical marijuana program.

See more on those comments in today’s PM Update.