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Senate pulls stewardship bills from calendar amid lack of needed GOP support

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Senate GOP leaders today dropped a planned vote on a $28.25 million package to extend the stewardship program after it failed to garner enough Republican support to clear the chamber.

GOP Sen. Pat Testin, who co-authored the package, told WisPolitics his efforts to get at least 17 Republican votes for the proposal had fallen short. Now, the only path forward to extend the program is to get his Senate Republican colleagues to get behind the bills that cleared the Assembly last month, Testin said.

If that fails, authorization for the program created in the 1989-90 session will lapse June 30.

“It’s like trying to squeeze a balloon,” the Stevens Point Republican said.

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Testin has made a series of changes to SB 316 and SB 685 in an attempt to garner enough support to clear the chamber.

But Senate Dems have remained steadfast in their opposition.

Ahead of today’s floor period, Senate Minority Leader Dianne Hesselbein, D-Middleton, said the GOP bill in current form was worse than allowing authorization for the program to expire and then trying again next session. She argued Republicans will be to blame if the package fails this session.

“The bill the Republicans have created and put on the calendar today is significantly

worse than the bill we began negotiating on months ago," Hesselbein said. "That's not negotiation. That's negation."

The current stewardship program authorized $33.25 million a year with $16 million for land acquisition. The Assembly approved a $28.25 million package last month that would limit acquisitions to just $1 million for land along the Ice Age Trail, along with $250,000 annually for acquisitions of 5 acres or less that improve access to hunting, fishing or trapping opportunities and are contiguous to land already owned by the state.

Testin authored an amendment that was approved in committee to add $2.5 million for land acquisitions by nonprofits while keeping the overall price tag at $28.25 million annually.

To shore up support among his GOP colleagues, Testin had proposed capping land purchases north of U.S. 8, which runs from St. Croix Falls in western Wisconsin to Rhinelander and Crandon before hitting the border with Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Sen. Mary Felzkowski, R-Tomahawk, told WisPolitics earlier this month the cap was one change she needed to consider backing the bill.

But Sen. Rob Stafsholt, R-New Richmond, had concerns about the restriction. Instead, the proposal was dropped and an amendment from Stafsholt was added to halt acquisitions in any city, village or town if 35% of its total acres are owned by the local, state or federal governments. The provision, which would apply to 2026-27 and 2027-28, would allow the local government to approve a resolution signing off on an acquisition if it'd already hit that cap.

Testin said he has a better chance of getting enough GOP votes to pass the Assembly bills than what he had put together, though he said even that will be a challenge.

"The only path forward we have now is to get support for what passed out of the Assembly," Testin said.