

UNDER THE DOME

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Assembly, Senate to Meet

The state Assembly will be in session Tuesday, April 4th to consider a number of bills aimed at addressing the state's heroin and opioid epidemic as part of a special session Governor Walker called for in January. Rep. John Nygren has taken the lead on eleven special session proposals, a continuation of the HOPE Agenda, that seek to expand access to opioid antagonists, provide limited immunity to those reporting drug overdoses, bolster treatment and diversion programs, create new positions to fight drug trafficking, create a recovery charter school for high schoolers, and allocate additional funding for mental health programs in schools. The state Assembly will also go into regular session to consider two joint resolutions and eight bills, including a measure that would make cheese the state's official dairy product, expand the settings in which dental hygienists can practice, and allow for the development of community paramedic programs in which Emergency Medical Services can operate in a non-emergency setting, under the medical direction of a physician, to provide treatment outside of a hospital. On the Senate side, they will meet to take-up legislation increasing broadband grant funding along with a proposed easing of the state's high-capacity well regulations. The appointment of Jay Risch as Department of Financial Institutions secretary is also listed on the calendar.

Evers, Holtz to Square off for State Superintendent

Two-term State Superintendent Tony Evers faces off against challenger Lowell Holtz in the spring election to be held April 4th. Evers received 68% of the vote in the primary to Holtz's 23%. John Humphries was eliminated after finishing a distant third with 7%. Evers, a public school advocate and opponent of school choice expansion, is aligned with Democrats and has the backing of the Wisconsin School Administrators Alliance, the American Federation of Teachers and the Wisconsin Education Association Council. Holtz has the support of many conservatives for his strong support of choice expansion and opposition to common core standards. He's backed by Pro-Life Wisconsin, Wisconsin Family Action, and two dozen Republican lawmakers. Evers has had a significant financial edge throughout the race. The Elections Commission said up to 18% turnout is expected. The average turnout in the past 11 spring elections with a statewide race was just over 19%. Turnout in the February primary was just 5.9%. Polls are open from 7am to 8pm.

Committee Approves Audit of UW Foundations, Controversy May Impact Budget Deliberations

The relationship between the UW System and affiliated private foundations at campuses across the state are being questioned by lawmakers and could play a role in budget deliberations according to comments made by GOP lawmakers. This comes after it was revealed UW-Oshkosh administrators misappropriated state funds for the foundation in order to complete a series of building projects. Speaking to members of both the Finance and Audit Committees, System President Ray Cross sought to reassure lawmakers it was an isolated incident and they are doing everything they can to deal with it, including a lawsuit against the former administrators. Cross also said he supports an audit of foundations that was recently approved by the Audit Committee. Speaking to reporters, Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald said the issue would be considered as lawmakers review Walker's proposed budget increase for the System. Assembly Speaker Robin Vos downplayed the issue, saying he hasn't seen evidence problems exist outside of UW-Oshkosh and wouldn't necessarily be tied to state funding.

Upcoming Session Days

The Senate and Assembly will be in session Tuesday, April 4th.

Heir to Trucking Fortune Considering Senate Run

Another potential GOP candidate for U.S. Senate emerged, adding to the list of those mulling a run against Democrat Tammy Baldwin. Nicole Schneider, daughter-in-law of the founder of Green Bay based Schneider trucking company, said she is looking at a run. Schneider joins Madison Millionaire Eric Hovde on the list of potential candidates who could self-fund a campaign. Other Republicans mulling a run include state Senator Leah Vukmir and Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald said he hasn't ruled out a run but is currently focused on the state budget. When asked about the prospects of Hovde or Schneider getting into the race, Fitzgerald said it would not be possible to out raise a self-funder, however, he or Senator Vukmir would benefit from having established name recognition.

Agency Budget Briefings Held, Committee Questions Key Parts of Walker Budget Proposal

Members of the legislature's Joint Finance Committee picked apart Governor Walker's \$76.1 billion budget proposal as they were briefed by state agency heads. The proposed switch to self-insurance for state employees, and savings of \$60 million Walker has tied to the move, along with Walker's plan for funding the state's roads were among the most contentious items. On self-funding, officials from the Depts. of Administration and Employee Trust Funds argued it was needed to find efficiencies, reduce government overhead and administrative costs, and would allow the state to direct significant savings into public schools and the UW System. JFC members continued to be largely critical of the proposal, questioning whether the savings would materialize, while voicing concerns with the potential for disruption in coverage and overall impact to the state's insurance market. Dept. of Transportation officials also faced push back on their budget proposal from lawmakers who argued it will not properly fund the state's infrastructure. Pointing to a \$1 billion shortfall in the transportation fund, a number of Republicans and Democrats on the committee urged the secretary and governor to consider a gas tax increase, coupled with corresponding tax decreases elsewhere in the budget, to pay for the state's roads. That led to a rare rebuttal from Governor Walker via social media, saying he would veto any such increase. GOP leaders also weighed in, with Assembly Speaker Robin Vos criticizing Walker for switching his position on an offset. Vos said he would consider a veto override while Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald said it is not on the table for his caucus. Other budget items sparking discussion among committee members included a proposed \$649 million increase for K-12 education and a provision that schools be in full compliance with Act 10 requirements in order to receive a funding boost, \$593 million in tax and fee cuts, including elimination of the state property tax and a sales tax holiday, an increase in the number of state tax auditors, a reorganization of the Dept. of Natural Resources, funding for the state's Veterans Homes, drug-testing and work requirements for public assistance beneficiaries, and staff reductions at the state Elections Commission.

Lawmakers Propose Constitutional Carry Measure

GOP Sen. Dave Craig and Rep. Mary Felzkowski circulated legislation that would eliminate the need for a concealed carry permit, in most cases. Concealed carry with a permit has been allowed in the state since 2011 while open carry without a permit was already and continues to be legal. Proponents of the less restrictive Constitutional Carry proposal, including 10 GOP Senators and 31 Reps. listed as sponsors, argue it simplifies state law and reduces costs for citizens simply looking to exercise their Second Amendment rights. Opponents of the measure include virtually all Democratic lawmakers, gun safety advocates, and law enforcement groups. Restrictions in the bill include a permit for carrying on school grounds, while campuses and universities will retain their ability to prohibit concealed carry in posted areas. Local government entities and business owners can also continue to post. Individuals who carry a firearm in violation of the posting could be charged with trespassing. The bill also specifies that an individual may legally possess a handgun in their vehicle, concealed or not, if they are legally allowed to carry a firearm, removes a prohibition against carrying a firearm while shining wildlife, and eliminates a prohibition against the possession of electronic weapons, tasers, as long as the individual is legally allowed to possess a firearm. Finally, the bill changes the definition of a firearm to exclude antiques, which were manufactured before 1898, and muzzleloaders, which Rep Felzkowski said is aimed at allowing those who were convicted of a felony to hunt with a muzzleloader. Assembly Speaker Robin Vos said that while his caucus has not yet discussed the measure, he is generally supportive. Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald said he is not sure yet whether it has enough support to pass the Senate.

Constitutional Convention Measure Considered

A GOP proposal that would add Wisconsin to the growing list of states calling for a constitutional convention was considered by a legislative committee. Article V of the Constitution allows a convention for proposing amendments to be held if two-thirds of the states - 34 - call for one. The resolution, authored by Sen. Chris Kapenga, would bar the federal government from spending more than it takes in and determine who would attend the convention while establishing rules that would be followed if it took place. Assembly Speaker Robin Vos is in support of the measure, arguing it is needed to place pressure on the federal government to take action to balance its budget. Opponents say a balanced budget amendment would make it harder for the federal government to respond to economic downturns and natural disasters. Senate Majority Leader Fitzgerald has cast doubt on the prospects of the resolution passing the Senate. If it were to succeed, Wisconsin would be the 30th of 34 needed states to call a convention.