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Legislature rushes to finish business before session ends

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Madison — Lawmakers are sprinting into a decisive week that will determine whether bills are passed that would curb global warming, allow the sale of raw milk and give the state schools superintendent the power to intervene in troubled schools.

They'll also decide whether to kick a representative out of the Assembly for the first time in nearly a century.

The Legislature's regular session ends Thursday, essentially meaning lawmakers must get any bills they want signed into law to Gov. Jim Doyle's desk by this week.

"It's like a funnel right now. There are so many things to get done but there's only so much time left and we want to make sure we get the Democrats' priorities - foremost job creation - accomplished," said Rep. Mark Pocan (D-Madison), co-chairman of the Legislature's Joint Finance Committee.

The Assembly has passed a series of job creation bills officials hope the Senate takes up this week. Democrats say the tax incentives will help spark the economy, while Republicans say the measures fall short.

Legislators will meet for a few days in May but only for limited matters, such as overriding vetoes or approving labor contracts. Any possible special session would be limited. Otherwise, they're not expected to return until next year, after the fall election.

Now is a crucial time for Democrats because they have the rare advantage of controlling both houses and the governor's office. But they are not always unified, and many of them are worried about tough votes that could hurt them at the polls at a time when Republicans appear to have an edge with voters.

Both houses plan to meet Tuesday and Thursday. Here's a look at the major issues facing lawmakers:

Global warming: Gov. Jim Doyle and others have spent years crafting a bill to curb emissions. Lawmakers scaled back the plan last week in hopes of passing it in the face of criticism that the bill would sour job growth.

It would require the state to generate 25% of its power from renewable sources by 2025 and would relax the state's moratorium on building nuclear reactors.

The Assembly is expected to take up the bill Tuesday.

In an ominous sign for the bill's chances, Senate Majority Leader Russ Decker (D-Wausau) said he couldn't vote for it as is because it would raise utility rates in a recession.

Education: Democrats appear likely to pass a deal on fixing troubled schools, which they say will improve their chances of securing a share of \$4.35 billion in federal Race to the Top funds.

The bill, passed Thursday by the Senate, was reached as a compromise after Democrats couldn't agree on a proposal by Doyle to allow the Milwaukee mayor to appoint the Milwaukee Public Schools superintendent.

The new bill would give the state schools superintendent the power to order school boards of districts with persistently failing schools to enact specific reforms, such as changing the way principals are hired and assigned to schools, and requiring more rigorous performance evaluations for teachers.

The bill will go Tuesday before the Assembly, where Rep. Annette Polly Williams (D-Milwaukee) and Republicans hope to stop it.

Payday lending: Both houses have passed bills to regulate payday loans, but it's unclear whether they can agree on a final bill to forward to Doyle.

Wisconsin is the only state that does not regulate payday loans, which can cost borrowers 500% or more a year in interest.

The biggest sticking point is over auto title loan provisions absent from the Senate bill, with some Assembly members saying regulations on those loans are essential to protecting consumers. The Assembly is taking up the Senate version of the bill Tuesday. If lawmakers there refuse to accept the Senate's version and amend it, that could kill the bill.

Elections: Democrats seem poised to pass a bill that would allow voters to register online for the first time. The sweeping measure also calls for automatically registering voters when they receive or renew their driver's licenses, limiting who can challenge a voter's ballot, and making it easier for soldiers stationed overseas to vote.

The Assembly will take up the bill Tuesday and then send it to the Senate.

Raw milk: The Senate on Thursday overwhelmingly approved allowing the sale of raw milk. There, the bill divided Democrats but had near unanimous support from Republicans.

Similarly, Assembly Democrats are split on the measure, with some saying consumers should have the right to buy it and others saying selling unpasteurized milk would put the public at risk because it can carry pathogens that cause food-borne illnesses. A major outbreak could threaten the state's entire dairy industry, even though the vast majority of milk is pasteurized, they say.

The Assembly is expected to pass the measure Tuesday.

Regional transit authority: There is still no clear path for Democrats to pass a regional transit authority bill that would allow a sales tax of up to 0.5% to be levied in Milwaukee County to fund public transportation.

The bill would allow local governments to create interim regional transit authorities in Milwaukee, Racine, Kenosha, Ozaukee, Walworth, Washington and Waukesha counties. Those authorities could raise money for their public bus systems, including the financially troubled Milwaukee County Transit System, through a sales tax or through membership fees charged to their local government members.

The interim authorities eventually would merge with the existing Southeastern Regional Transit Authority, which is already in charge of the planned KRM Commuter Link rail line.

Jeff Wood: Rep. Wood (I-Chippewa Falls) failed to force a decision Friday on whether he will be removed from the Assembly, reprimanded or receive no discipline for being arrested and charged with driving under the influence three times since December 2008. Wood is expected to plead no contest Monday in one of those cases.

Republicans, who want him expelled, said they will try to take up the matter Tuesday.

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