

Iowa Legislature Adjourns Third-Longest Session in State's History

Written by Lynn Campbell
Friday, 01 July 2011 08:37

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Iowa lawmakers on Thursday adjourned the third-longest legislative session in state history with Republicans touting their success in being fiscally responsible and Democrats lamenting what they saw as too little funding for education.

Adjournment finally came on the last day of the state fiscal year and the 172nd calendar day of session. The only times that the legislature has taken longer to adjourn its regular session were 1967 (when lawmakers adjourned July 2 after 175 days) and 1978 (when session adjourned July 15 after 188 days).

"We all just want to go home," said Representative Matt Windschitl (R-Missouri Valley).

The Iowa House adjourned first at 3:36 p.m. after 61-31 passage of the health-and-human-services budget bill and closing-day speeches by leaders. The Iowa Senate followed by approving that same bill 27-18 and adjourning at 3:43 p.m. Both chambers also approved a one-month budget that continues state services while giving the governor 30 days to review the just-passed bills.

The state budget lawmakers approved for Fiscal Year 2012 spends \$5.99 billion, or about 95 percent of available revenues. It is projected to leave the state with a \$284-million ending balance after all of the state's reserve funds are filled.

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In addition, \$38 million will go to a new Taxpayers Trust Fund created earlier this year to provide tax cuts, although lawmakers have not yet detailed how that money will be spent. The amount in that fund will increase up to \$60 million if the estimate of state revenues grows, said Lon Anderson, the Republican senior deputy caucus-staff director.

“Job number one was bringing the state budget under control, solving the fiscal crisis, and restoring predictability and stability to the state budget so those receiving state services could count on their uninterrupted delivery,” Governor Terry Branstad said after adjournment. “Iowans asked us to fix this fiscal mess, and we made historic progress toward that goal this year, and we will continue that work as we move forward.”

Disappointment on Education Funding, Property-Tax Relief

State lawmakers were so eager to get home that leaders of the Iowa Senate chose not to read their closing-day speeches, instead distributing copies to the media.

Iowa Senate Majority Leader Mike Gronstal (D-Council Bluffs) said in his prepared closing remarks that it was a difficult session. He said he still didn't understand why the Senate “was forced to fight furiously” for education this year: “The state of Iowa was forced into a lengthy, bitter fight to save preschool, to provide a modest increase in state support to local schools the year after next, and to soften cuts to colleges. These fights, all of which could have been easily avoided, nearly brought Iowa its first-ever government shutdown.”

Iowa House Speaker Kraig Paulsen (R-Hiawatha) said this year's session lasted so long because of philosophical disagreements between the Republican-controlled House and the Democrat-led Senate, both passionate about their beliefs. But Paulsen said the split government forced people with differing perspectives to work together, and he said that was healthy for the process.

Paulsen touted that Republicans held true to their principles this year to put Iowans back to work, to make it easier to be an employer in the state of Iowa, to refuse to spend more than the state takes in, to shrink the size, scope, and cost of state government, and to give the taxpayers a seat at the table.

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"Through 172 days, we have not wavered from those principles," Paulsen said. "They have not changed, and they will not change."

But Branstad and Paulsen both said they were disappointed that the legislature was unsuccessful in approving property-tax reform. Plans to provide property-tax relief to businesses and to all taxpayers were abandoned on the second-to-last day of session after lawmakers failed to reach agreement on the issue.

"The inability of Senate Democrats to address commercial property taxes in a way that aids our economic-development efforts means Iowa will continue to have the second-highest commercial property taxes in the nation, and this will certainly make the work of our job-creators that much more difficult," Branstad said. "In addition, the lack of action by Senate Democrats on property taxes will mean residential taxpayers in this state will see historic increases in their property taxes over the next five years, as record prices for commodities will trigger a roll-up in residential property taxes."

Branstad has said that Iowans would see their property taxes increase by \$1.3 billion during the next five years if lawmakers didn't approve his plan to reduce commercial property taxes by 40 percent. But Democrats have called that estimated property-tax increase "a stretch" because it's based on the assumption that local governments would increase their tax levies each year by the 4-percent maximum permitted by state law. Democrats predicted that local governments would instead lower their levy rates to prevent such a tax hike.

Abortion the Final Issue That Help Up Adjournment

The closing hours of the 2011 session boiled down to abortion, an issue that vexed lawmakers throughout the year.

Republicans wanted to prevent Medicaid, the state/federal health-care program for those with low incomes, from paying for abortions even in cases of rape, incest, or fetal abnormality. Democrats said the move would have jeopardized \$2.5 billion that Iowa receives from the federal government for Medicaid.

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“There are a great deal of lowans out there that for whatever reason do not support having their taxpayer dollars go for an abortion even if it is for rape or incest, even if it is for a fetal abnormality,” Windschitl said. “The one thing that we know that lowans can stomach, at least at this point, is ... if the life of the mother is endangered. At that point, we believe that most lowans, the majority of lowans out there, agree that that mother should be taken care of.”

The state and federal governments have paid for abortions in these special circumstances for more than 30 years. In Iowa, \$40,000 in the human-services budget pays for such abortions at the University of Iowa. But Windschitl, who was key in the negotiations, said the changing climate in Iowa and America caused Republicans to take a fresh look at the issue this year.

“It comes down to that moral question, that moral fiber: Can you say it’s okay and put your head on the pillow and sleep at night, or is it something that twists your gut and does not allow you to have a clean conscience when you wake up?” Windschitl asked.

In the end, lawmakers struck a compromise that still allows Medicaid to pay for abortions in cases of rape, incest, or significant fetal abnormality, or when the life of the mother in is danger. However, the bill approved Thursday would require those pregnant women to be informed of all their options, including adoption, and to hear about the risks of abortion. They must be offered the option to see an ultrasound of the fetus. And the governor can petition the federal government to change the Medicaid-funded services that Iowa provides.

“This is a great step forward for the pro-life community,” Windschitl said.

Iowa House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (D-Des Moines) said the abortion debate came down to the “right wing versus [the] ultra right wing” of the Republican Party. He lamented that lawmakers did not focus enough on “bread-and-butter” issues this year and instead took too much time debating divisive issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and changes to collective bargaining.

“This year, from a minority perspective, it’s been far too partisan,” McCarthy said. “Let’s try to resolve our differences much, much earlier. lowans expect us to work together.”

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