Written by Lynn Campbell
Friday, 09 March 2012 06:16

Prospects for bills that would ban red-light cameras and increase Iowa's gas tax are dimming as state lawmakers work to pare down their workload in the final month of session.

March 16 is the Iowa legislature's second "funnel" deadline, when bills must clear one chamber and a committee of the opposite chamber to remain alive. The 2012 legislative session is scheduled to end April 17.

Iowa House Speaker Kraig Paulsen (R-Hiawatha) said March 8 that a bill that would ban red-light and speed cameras in Iowa as of July 1 does not have the 51 votes to pass the Iowa House. Seven Iowa cities use the cameras to issue traffic tickets of up to $200 for speeding or running red lights. "My understanding is it's short of the votes," Paulsen said.

And despite additional progress in the Senate this week on a bill that would increase Iowa's gas tax by 5 cents in 2013 and another 5 cents in 2014, legislative leaders indicated that final passage does not appear likely.

"Obviously, [with] high gas prices, we have great concern about their impact on Iowa citizens," said Senate Majority Leader Mike Gronstal (D-Council Bluffs). "That has made people think twice about this issue."

But increasing the gas tax to pay for Iowa's roads and bridges remains key to county leaders. A state commission in November identified a $1.6-billion annual shortfall for transportation infrastructure needs, including $215 million a year that's considered "critical."

"I think we just want to fix our infrastructure," Sioux County Supervisor Mark Sybesma said. "We have a neighboring county that has 122 bridges that are in dire need of repair, and they don't have the money to do it."

House Schedules Education Debate; Action on Nuclear Bill Postponed

Legislation on education reform, a nuclear power plant, and online poker is hanging in the balance.

The Iowa House has scheduled floor debate of education reform next week. Governor Terry Branstad's proposal called for retaining third-graders who can't read, requiring high-school students to take end-of-course exams before for graduation, and evaluating teachers annually instead of every three years.

House Democrats plan to bring new ideas to the table, from expanding state-funded preschool from 10 to 15 hours each week to further reducing class sizes to putting more Advanced Placement classes online to spending more money for teacher collaboration.

"We're focusing on the literacy of a child before third grade," said Senator Sharon Steckman (D-Mason City), a retired teacher.

Meanwhile, the Senate Commerce Committee on March 8 postponed action on a bill that would pave the way for MidAmerican Energy Co. to charge ratepayers upfront to build a nuclear power plant.

Members of AARP Iowa, a not-for-profit advocacy group for seniors, have made thousands of calls to the Iowa Senate switchboard to oppose the bill. Local youth also have planned a "Radioactive Zombies March" to the Capitol on March 9 to protest of the legislation.

Senator Matt McCoy (D-Des Moines) this week said a deal had been struck and the votes were there to pass the bill. The compromise would require MidAmerican to have financing in place before beginning construction of a nuclear power plant. Once state regulators approve a new plant, the utility would have to carry out construction.

But environmentalists said the latest changes still do not protect consumers from increased rates or huge risks.

“It won’t keep Iowans from being forced to pay the bill if MidAmerican walks away from Iowa,” said Steve Falck, an energy policy expert with the Environmental Law & Policy Center, a Midwest environmental-advocacy organization.

Gronstal said the fate of the nuclear bill “could go either way.” He also said debate of a bill that would legalize online poker in Iowa “continues to be possible.”

Property-Tax, Mental-Health Reform Exempt from Funnel

Other key issues of the 2012 session – including property-tax reform, government efficiency, and mental-health reform – are “funnel proof” as budget and tax bills.

Paulsen expressed optimism March 8 that the Senate and House can come to an agreement on a way to reform Iowa’s property-tax system for the first time in more than 30 years. Each chamber has approved its own version of a plan.

“I think some progress has been made because I haven’t heard the same number of ultimatums or lines in the sand being drawn in the last week to 10 days,” Paulsen said. “I find that somewhat encouraging. That would really be a shame if we miss this opportunity.”

Work also continues on legislation to transform Iowa’s 99-county system for providing mental-health services into a more uniform, statewide system. The issue is a priority for Iowa’s counties. Paulsen called it a three- to five-year project. A new Senate bill is expected Monday.

“There are a couple of pieces that may have some challenges still,” said state Representative Renee Schulte (R-Cedar Rapids), who added that this issue is affected by what happens with property taxes. “We don’t have the full funding picture settled. One chamber is much more set on there being regions for delivery of services, and the other one is a little more flexible.”

Advocates Still Hope for Action on Marriage Amendment

The Family Leader, a group that lobbies against gay marriage and abortion, is circulating an online petition in support of a resolution calling for a state constitutional amendment banning gay marriage.

The resolution was approved in the Iowa House last year, but it has languished in the Senate. The group also has scheduled a Statehouse rally for 10 a.m. March 20.

“We want to flood the Capitol and let the legislators know that marriage is important,” said Bob Vander Plaats, president and CEO of The Family Leader. “We want to put pressure on Senator Gronstal to say, ‘Let it come up for a vote. Let the people of Iowa vote.’”

But Gronstal has said such an amendment would write discrimination into the Iowa Constitution. Democrats hold a 26-24 majority in the Iowa Senate, and the issue will almost certainly not be taken up while Democrats are still in control.

Gay marriage is legal in Iowa, but activists want to negate a 2009 Iowa Supreme Court ruling with the amendment.

“It remains a top priority,” said Danny Carroll, a lobbyist for The Family Leader. “We’re under no illusions, though. We take Senator Gronstal at his word that he’s not going to bring it up as long as he’s majority leader. But there are 25 other Democrats in that caucus, and we hope that they will prevail upon him to do the right thing.”

This article was produced by IowaPolitics.com . For more stories on Iowa politics, visit RCReader.com/y/iapolitics

.