

Assembly Ignores Public Good With Torrent of Late Bills

MADISON -- The state Assembly adjourned historically early in mid-February. In the last few session days, we passed hundreds of bills. Many were barely discussed before being quick-marched to passage.

It wasn't all bad. We passed bipartisan bills to help families cope with Alzheimer's disease and dementia. Those bills were produced through study by the Speaker's Task Force on Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia, on which I served.

But the Assembly and its members committed political mischief in those last days, sometimes in the midnight hour when few were watching. It was all about politics and campaigns, not the public good.

Consider Rep. Scott Krug, R-Nekoosa, and his votes on a high-capacity well bill. Rep. Krug apparently did not want to get caught on the wrong side of the bill.

So he figured out a way to vote with both sides.

Rep. Krug introduced a substitute amendment for the bill, argued for it, voted for it and saw it adopted. Then, when the time came to vote for the amended bill, he voted "no."

I suppose that Rep. Krug believes he can tell the environmentalists that he voted against the high-capacity well bill and the corporate farm groups that he voted "yes."

Consider the Vos amendment to a special-education bill. Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, offered an amendment to the bill that had nothing to do with special education. The amendment was introduced at the last minute. It was unavailable to be vetted by the public but has huge consequences. Its passage means public schools will lose millions of dollars.

You cannot fairly argue that the amendment was proper or timely. The Vos amendment was glued to an unrelated bill. Vos seems to have proposed it because an editorial accused him of increasing taxes due to voucher-school expansion.

Consider the Mark Harris bill. Harris, a Democrat and the Winnebago County executive, considered running for governor in the last election. He is a logical candidate in the 18th Senate District for a seat being vacated by Sen. Rick Gudex, a Republican.

The Republicans conjured up a last-minute bill to bar county executives from legislative service. It was a transparent move to derail the Harris candidacy. Holding these dual offices has not been a problem before. Sen. Paul Farrow of Waukesha held both offices, for example, as did Rep. Bob Ziegelbauer.

Writing laws to disqualify specific candidates you don't want to face perverts the legislative process.

The Assembly crammed hundreds of bills into the last session days and then adjourned so members can raise cash and campaign. Earlier in the session, the majority party ensured access to unlimited campaign cash while getting rid of the agency that had oversight on ethics.

During the last, fast and furious week of the session, we did nothing to address our crumbling roads or pay for public education. We did nothing about job creation.

The closing hours of the 102nd Wisconsin State Assembly are evidence that nothing matters but money, power and the next election.