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**Legal tab for GOP lawmakers’ private attorneys nears $4.8 million**

*By WisPolitics.com*

The tab for private attorneys hired by Republican lawmakers in Wisconsin has now hit nearly $4.8 million for this legislative session, fueled recently by fights over Gov. Tony Evers’ orders during the COVID-19 pandemic and a string of election lawsuits.

The tab jumps to $5.5 million when legal bills from the Wisconsin Elections Commission and Evers are added.

The rising legal bills underscore how often Republicans have turned to private attorneys since Democratic Attorney General Josh Kaul took office. They gave themselves new powers during the 2018 lame-duck session to intervene in various suits involving the Department of Justice.

In the lawsuits filed over the extraordinary session, Kaul declined to represent the governor or Legislature, saying it would be a conflict of interest. Kaul also has been generally representing Evers in the suits emanating out of the April 7 election.

Still, Republicans have hired legal counsel in the election law cases even with the state and national Republican parties involved in the suits. The suits were generally filed by Democrats and Democratic-leaning groups. GOP lawmakers’ legal bills have already topped $830,000 in those Democratic suits and will climb higher as a federal judge weighs a request from Democrats to make changes to the November election to accommodate voters amid the pandemic. A trial is scheduled for early August in the cases.

Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, and Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, blamed Democrats for the GOP legal tab. The money covers cases involving the DNR’s authority over groundwater, two challenges to the governor's partial veto authority and abortion restrictions Republicans approved under then-Gov. Scott Walker.

“As long as Democrats continue to use the courts as a place to further their liberal agenda, and as long as the governor allows his administration to break state laws, we will be forced to hire lawyers to defend Wisconsin law,” Vos said. “The frivolous lawsuits and costly political games played by Democrats are frustrating and should stop.”

Fitzgerald added, “If Governor Evers and his liberal allies would stop breaking the law or suing us, we wouldn’t need to hire lawyers.”

Neither statement addressed questions posed to the leaders about why GOP lawmakers hired private attorneys in cases where the state and national Republican parties were already involved. They also didn’t address whether they were considering cost-saving measures to offset the rising legal bills with the state facing a drop in revenues due to the economic impact of COVID-19.

The overall budget for the Legislature for 2019-21 is $153.9 million in general purpose revenue. But the branch receives a sum sufficient appropriation, meaning there’s no cap on its spending.

Doug Poland, an attorney who’s represented Democratic groups in various lawsuits in which GOP lawmakers have sought to intervene, said the rising legal tab is a direct result of Republicans giving themselves the power to intervene in cases as part of the package they approved in the 2018 executive session.

“The Legislature continues to want to concentrate power and control in itself and siphon power away from the attorney general and the governor,” he said.

*The Capitol Report is written by editorial staff at WisPolitics.com, a nonpartisan, Madison-based news service that specializes in coverage of government and politics, and is distributed for publication by members of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association.*

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