*Editor’s note: This column is provided to Wisconsin Newspaper Association members by WisPolitics.com. Proper attribution in your newspapers is appreciated, including the byline “WisPolitics.com” and the tagline that is included at the end of the column.*

**Democrats: Task force not effective response to racial, policing issues**

*By WisPolitics.com*

Assembly Speaker Robin Vos’ call for a task force to address racial disparity and public safety falls far short of what’s needed in the wake of civil unrest after Kenosha police officer Rusten Sheskey shot Jacob Blake, say Capitol Democrats who question the effectiveness of such panels.

“Vos didn’t decide to convene this task force until backed into a corner, and now he gets to use it as his excuse for not doing anything,” Rep. Sondy Pope, D-Mt. Horeb told WisPolitics.com. “They’re pretending to do something when they don’t really want to do anything.”

Pope and a host of other Democratic lawmakers also knocked the track record of past task forces proposed by the speaker, criticizing them as slow and largely ineffective.

In announcing the task force, Vos called for “a path forward as a society that brings everyone together.”

“This is not a time for political posturing or to suggest defunding law enforcement,” he said in response to Gov. Tony Evers’ special session call for Aug. 31. “When a community is hurting, the most important thing that we can do is to listen.”

But Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes said Vos’ move amounted to “another abdication of responsibility” while Evers noted “there are still bills that are still sitting in the Legislature that were the result of task forces.”

A WisPolitics.com review of the bills developed by task forces Vos created this session — on adoption, water quality and suicide prevention — shows three of the 30 legislative recommendations have cleared both chambers of the Legislature. Evers has signed all three into law.

Of the remaining 27 bills, all passed the Assembly but are languishing due to lack of action in the Senate. That chamber could still take those bills up in extraordinary session.

Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald indicated before the pandemic struck earlier this year that members had interest in moving on some of the bills from the water quality task force, but a Fitzgerald spokesman told WisPolitics.com this week there were no updates on the package.

“If the Legislature were to come back in session at some point, these bills could be resurrected and considered, but as of today there are no extraordinary floor sessions planned in the Senate,” spokesman Dan Romportl said.

Quizzed on the task forces, Vos spokeswoman Kit Beyer said many of the bills were still in the Senate because the legislative session came to an “abrupt halt” due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Assembly Minority Leader Gordon Hintz countered the Senate chose not to take up the bills well ahead of the pandemic and said Vos should bear responsibility.

“The first few task forces produced nothing and if the Senate was the problem, then maybe it should have been a legislative task force with the Senate to get them to embrace (the recommendations),” the Oshkosh Democrat told WisPolitics.com. “If you’re actually trying to get things done then you probably should design it with that kind of outcome in mind.”

Beyer added that the percentage of task force bills signed into law was similar to the overall percentage of bills introduced this session that became law. The Assembly has introduced 1,038 proposals this session. Evers has signed 186 bills into law, good for a rate of 18 percent.

She also pointed to six other task forces created by Vos during his time as speaker. Those panels focused on foster care, Alzheimer’s and dementia, urban education, youth workforce readiness, mental health and rural schools; they had mixed levels of success during a period when the GOP enjoyed a trifecta of state government control.

Eleven of the 13 legislative recommendations from the foster care task force were signed into law, but only three of the 10 from a panel studying Alzheimer’s and dementia became law.

The remaining four task forces are harder to judge because their final reports included recommendations that were not linked to legislation. Beyer highlighted six laws stemming from the mental health task force and a half dozen recommendations from the rural schools panel that were included in the Legislature’s 2015 budget bill.

She also noted the youth workforce readiness task force’s recommendations were the basis for an expansion of the Department of Workforce Development’s Fast Forward program funding school-to-skilled work initiatives.

“It should always be viewed as a success when Republicans and Democrats come together to listen to Wisconsinites and work on the important issues facing the state,” Beyer said in an email.

But Democrats charge the task forces do exactly the opposite.

Democrats on panels examining youth workforce readiness and urban education released scathing minority reports accusing Republicans of ignoring their input and failing to take meaningful action.

Pope, who served on the rural schools task force and authored the Democratic urban education task force report after serving as vice-chair, said the panels she served on produced “absolutely nothing of substance.”

“They all turn out the same. We spend time and money examining the problem, people clearly tell us what the problem is and then we come back and don’t do anything,” she said. “It’s so pointless.”

Hintz acknowledged some of the previous task forces had led to “real discussions” on the issues they examined. This session’s water quality task force has won plaudits for its bipartisan spirit, though none of its recommendations have been enacted into law.

But Hintz added Vos’ latest proposal is nothing more than “political cover” for Republican lawmakers facing tough re-election fights.

“Task forces are not governing; it’s really the illusion of governing,” he said. “The result where 10 percent of the recommendations become law demonstrates that.”

Hintz, D-Oshkosh, said he backed Evers’ package of bills aimed at overhauling police policies. Evers has called for lawmakers to take up the package in a special session scheduled for Monday.

“I think one of the reasons we should act now and not wait until the next session is demonstrating to the public that we care enough to be responsive to these big issues,” he said. “They want to know that something is going to change or start to change or that there’s a signal out there that the people that are elected recognize this crisis for what it is.”

*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.*

*Copyright © WisPolitics.com*