**A statewide referendum -- in August**

By WisPolitics.com

Primaries are notoriously low turnout affairs.

So it's an interesting play by the Republican majority in the Assembly to set for the August partisan primary a proposed constitutional amendment on whether the governor should have to get state legislative approval to spend federal money.

The conflict between Democratic Gov. Tony Evers and the GOP-dominated Legislature was spurred by a dispute over federal COVID money flowing into Wisconsin.

The development on the timing of the referendum came during the rush of the final scheduled week of floor action for the Assembly in late February. The state Senate keeps going into March before breaking for a pivotal election season under new legislative maps.

GOP lawmakers proposed AJR 6 after Evers had sole power to disburse tens of millions of dollars in federal COVID-19 funds. The Senate earlier in February approved the amendment after pushing the date to put the question to voters from April to November.

The Assembly then added a change from Majority Leader Tyler August, R-Lake Geneva, putting the question before voters in the August primary this year. Since the change only affects the implementation date it didn't need to go back to the Senate for approval.

Under current law, Evers has the power to accept federal money on behalf of the state and allocate it without specific legislative approval. The amendment would bar the Legislature from delegating its power to determine how funds are spent and would require the governor to get lawmakers’ approval before disbursing the money.

The Assembly voted 61-35 along party lines to approve the ballot measure. Now voters will decide.

On another proposed amendment, the Assembly also voted 63-33 to approve SJR 54, which would bar the closure of places of worship during a health emergency. The amendment is on first consideration and would have to pass again next session before it is sent to voters for referendum.

Democratic Reps. Shelia Stubbs, of Madison, and Sylvia Ortiz-Velez, of Milwaukee, joined Republicans in favor. The Senate approved the measure along party lines in November.

The measure was proposed in response to orders closing churches during the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bill author Rep. Ty Bodden, R-Hilbert, said the measure would “restore constitutional rights given to the citizens of Wisconsin by allowing them to practice their faith no matter their religion during a health emergency.”

“I’m sure like in the past if there’s an emergency that arises, places of worship will make the right decision for their body, they’ll know what’s best for their safety,” he said. Bodden was the only member to speak on the proposal.

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