



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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WINDOW FOR LEGISLATIVE ACTIVITY IN 2008 IS SMALL

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

The 2008 legislative session begins on January 15th and in theory runs until the early summer. But in practice the window of legislative activity is much smaller.

For openers, the scheduling resolution adopted in January of 2007 sets aside only certain days as “floor periods” or those times when the Senate and Assembly convene to vote on bills referred to the respective bodies by committees. This resolution identified only 24 days of general floor period activity are scheduled between January 15th and March 13th. Thus unless a bill is enacted by March 13th it will not become law.

However, just the fact that 24 days are scheduled does not mean the two houses will actually convene. Indeed, the Assembly has already decided it will not meet on several of the days originally scheduled for January. In fact, there may be as few as 15 days of actual session activity in 2008. That is not a great deal of time for bills to pass both houses, especially if they have yet to receive a public hearing.

Moreover, control of the legislature remains divided between a Democratic State Senate and a Republican Assembly. This means that no bill will pass that is not acceptable in some fashion to both parties. The list of such bills is likely to be a short one.

However, while few bills are expected to become law, many bills will be debated as the two parties seek to “make a record” for the voters to consider as the campaign season begins later this summer. Some Assembly Republicans will offer proposals that address their priorities to foster a stronger business climate and market based health care reform. Some Senate Democrats want to showcase the “Healthy Wisconsin” initiative.

In addition, both parties can be expected to champion legislation that responds to priorities of important interest groups who are active in the election campaigns. The debates over such issues have proven useful over the years as means of reminding groups who their friends are come November.

Other bills will be introduced and debated at legislative hearings to attract public attention with the idea of improving their chances for passage in the 2009 session. Some of these “trial runs” may involve new programs or policy changes that their backers hope to see included in the 2009 state budget.

As with any legislative plan, one must allow for contingencies. Sobering economic news or other developments might yet warrant the need to reexamine the spending levels agreed to in the state budget. If that does happen, the need to adjust the budget will absorb much of the legislative time available in the next three months.

Another staple of these election year sessions is that much of the activity will be concentrated in the final two weeks of the session. If the past is any guide, and it usually is, as many as half of all the bills passed by the 2007-08 legislature will be approved in March of this year.

What all this means is that the next two months will be a good time to pay close attention to the State Capitol.

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