

Capitolwire: House and Senate approve separate COVID-19 response bills.

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HARRISBURG (April 7) – The House and Senate each approved bills Tuesday responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the session day ended without either chamber taking up the other’s bill despite earlier indications that could happen.

The two chambers adjourned until later this month after the House voted 108-93 along party lines to approve an amended [Senate Bill 327](#) addressing state government’s role in the pandemic.

The Senate, meanwhile, voted unanimously to approve an amended [Senate Bill 841](#) addressing matters involving local government’s response with the pandemic.

In trying to fashion a common legislative response to the pandemic, the Republican majority caucuses apparently still have to iron out several issues, including historic differences over property tax reform.

House GOP leaders this week floated the idea of an election year freeze on school property tax hikes due to the pandemic, while Senate Republicans provided local governments greater flexibility on property tax deadlines in SB841.

Meanwhile, House Democratic lawmakers objected that SB327 would curb Gov. Tom Wolf’s power to deal with the pandemic while House Majority Leader Bryan Cutler, R-Lancaster, said his caucus has little confidence in the governor’s ability to weigh the long-term impact of business closure orders.

The House-passed SB327 creates a 23-member Interbranch COVID 19 Cost and Recovery Task Force to track and manage recovery plans, directs a review by the Pennsylvania Treasury on how to use zero interest rates to reduce the state government debt and requires Wolf to notify lawmakers of any actions to suspend, modify or waive a state regulation during the emergency.

Besides its monitoring duties, the task force would identify immediate issues requiring government action, develop a recovery plan focusing on the reopening of society and issue a final report six months after the emergency is over, according to a House Appropriations Committee fiscal note.

The task force would consist of 16 legislative branch members, four executive branch members and three judicial branch members. The governor, caucus leaders and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court would have appointive powers.

A special task force is needed because the pandemic challenge is too great for different parts of state government to “waste time and resources,” said Cutler.

The debt review provision requires the state Treasurer working with the budget secretary and auditor general to review all existing debt obligations and identify options for refinancing debt to reduce costs with a June 30 report date to the General Assembly.

“The interest rates are at historic lows,” said Cutler. “We owe it to every Pennsylvanian to review costs, the debt we have and save money where we can.”

However, House Minority Appropriations Committee Chairman Matt Bradford, R-Montgomery, said the three amendments included in SB327 would interfere with the Governor’s work and don’t have bipartisan support.

The GOP push for these amendments contrasts with the bipartisanship shown two weeks ago when the House approved operating rules changes to allow remote voting by members, added Bradford.

The bill would tie the hands of the governor at a time when he needs flexibility, said House Minority Leader Frank Dermody, D-Allegheny.

SB327 doesn't include a number of potential amendments that were floated just on Monday by House GOP leaders, but left out of the final version. These include placing the freeze on school property tax hikes, providing businesses responding to the pandemic with liability protection and creating a process for the early release of state prison inmates.

Cutler, later on Tuesday during a conference call with reporters, said the House will continue to work on the list of amendments that didn't make it into SB327.

Senate-passed SB841 contains several provisions dealing with local government. The bill gives local governments the option of waiving fees and penalties for the late payment of property taxes if paid in full by the end of the year and extends deadlines for property tax discount rates until Aug. 31.

The bill would allow school districts to renegotiate contracts with service providers to help keep costs fixed and personnel employed while schools are closed due to the pandemic and extends deadlines for participating businesses to make payments under the state Educational Improvement Tax Credit program.

SB 841 would also allow local governments to conduct remote meetings and allow notaries to do business remotely through electronic communications.

At the day's end, the House Appropriations Committee approved an amended [Senate Bill 613](#) on a party-line vote to provide a way for businesses that follow federal safety recommendations to reopen. The amendment says the governor shall implement a COVID-19 mitigation plan for businesses to follow upon reopening.

"House Republicans flatly reject the idea that we must choose between either protecting public health or safeguarding the economy," said Cutler in a statement.

Bradford read a letter from state Health Secretary Dr. Rachel Levine saying that reopening businesses prematurely would lead to more COVID-19 cases and undermine the state's collective response to the pandemic.

House Majority Appropriations Committee Chairman Stan Saylor, R-York, announced prior to the panel vote that SB613 wouldn't face a floor vote on Tuesday.

The House is scheduled back in session on April 14 unless called back earlier while the Senate is slated to return April 20 unless called back earlier.