

RI Lawmakers Close Year's Business With A Flurry

By Steve Peoples
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PROVIDENCE — Nine hours after Thursday night's action began, state lawmakers filed out of the House and Senate chambers for what would probably be the last time this year.

They recessed shortly after 12:30 a.m. Friday, ending a rare October gathering of the part-time legislature after approving a slew of high-profile bills that outlaw text messaging behind the wheel, require \$7 saltwater fishing licenses, force lenders to help homeowners avoid foreclosure, and tighten the state's drunken-driving laws on land and water.

As his colleagues swapped goodbyes around him, an exhausted Senate Majority Leader Daniel P. Connors defended the Assembly's work early Friday amid Republican criticism that Democrats had largely wasted their time this week.

"I think we accomplished a lot of important things," Connors said, noting that in addition to adopting a bevy of new laws, several study commissions have been convened to address economic issues and structural budget problems.

Overall, the Assembly approved virtually everything on its crowded calendars — and a few items that hadn't been listed on the calendars — racing to pass legislation left in limbo after lawmakers abruptly recessed for the summer in the early-morning hours of June 27. This week's action also includes the passage of laws to outlaw indoor prostitution, re-open the Westerly branch of the Division of Motor Vehicles, and require the police to record interrogations of suspects in serious crimes.

Attention now turns to Governor Carcieri, who could wipe away much of the Assembly's recent work with the stroke of his veto pen.

"Some bills were transmitted very, very late," Carcieri spokeswoman Amy Kempe said Friday, declining to specify when veto decisions might be made. "The team is expected to start the review process today with the governor."

While there are enough Democrats to overturn the Republican governor's vetoes, Assembly leaders don't plan to reconvene their full membership until Jan. 5, according to Larry Berman, spokesman for House Speaker William J. Murphy. Lawmakers could overturn vetoes that day. There is little question that the governor will exercise his veto power, as he has at the end of every legislative session.

While the Assembly resisted organized labor's push to implement binding arbitration for teachers unions, they approved a controversial measure to increase the number of apprentices and other union workers on some construction projects.

Blasted as a handout to labor, AFL-CIO President George Nee later praised the move, which narrowly cleared the House before being passed overwhelmingly in the Senate.

"That's a very important issue to the whole labor movement," Nee said, noting that labor officials would lobby the governor's office over the coming days against a veto.

The narrow passage of the apprentice bill, and legislative leaders' unwillingness to approve binding arbitration, was cause for celebration for at least one labor critic.

"The public employee unions are on life support in that building," said Rep. Douglas W. Gablinske, D-Bristol. "After decades of controlling the public policy agenda, there is a shift under way."

Nee didn't see it that way: "It's not an easy place to do business when times are tough," he said. "But we've been around a long time and we'll be around a lot longer." Meanwhile, while the full Assembly likely won't take any more formal votes this year, its business isn't quite complete.

House Democrats will gather next week to discuss new legislative priorities and the state's dire economic situation, according to Berman. The Senate, meanwhile, has convened four study commissions to examine budget and economic issues, according to Senate spokesman Greg Pare.

And both chambers will convene separate "economic summits" in early December. This week, meanwhile, there were few items on the legislative calendars that weren't ultimately approved.

But after the House passed a proposal that would wipe away criminal records of offenders with deferred sentences, the Senate failed to address the measure. It's now considered dead, for this year at least.

The pace of this week's action drew criticism from one government watchdog group. Between Tuesday afternoon and the wee hours of Friday morning, lawmakers reviewed or voted on more than 200 proposals. Many were debated publicly in recent months, although some were changed in recent days.

"It was somewhat unbelievable to me how quickly it was moving. Sitting in the House gallery, I think I saw them do 23 bills in 20 minutes," said John Marion, executive director of Common Cause Rhode Island. "People lose faith in the democratic process when they think it's being sped up for the convenience of their elected representatives."

See next page for Assembly Score Card Of Bills Passed

ASSEMBLY SCORE CARD

PASSED

Prostitution
Criminalizes indoor prostitution
Saltwater fishing
License required effective Jan. 1; \$7 fee
State name
Voters to decide on removing "Plantations"
Texting
Text-messaging while driving is banned
U.S. Senate vacancies
To be filled by special election, not gubernatorial appointment
Gambling revenues
Lincoln to get larger share from Twin River's receipts
Drunken driving
Police can get warrant for blood alcohol test
Same-sex rights
Partners gain right to make funeral arrangements
Boating safety
Tougher penalties for minors
operating while intoxicated
Foreclosure prevention
New requirements for lenders to work with borrowers
Westerly DMV
To be reopened one day a week
N.E. Patriots plate
Portion of fees to support R.I. charities
Mixed martial arts
Competitions allowed
Interrogations
Police must record
in capital cases
Bar closings
Extra hour on weekends
with no alcohol sales
FAILED
Criminal records
Automatic erasure in 5 years
after deferred sentence

POSTPONED

Binding arbitration
To settle teacher contract disputes