

Time running out for Legislature

As clock ticks, key proposals remain on lawmakers' must-do list

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Just imagine trying to decide how to spend roughly \$6 billion - and the money's not yours.

Now try to imagine what it would be like to come up with plans to help wean Iowa off imported oil, ease property taxes on businesses and corral sex offenders.

At the Iowa Statehouse those are very real tasks - not mental exercises - for legislators hoping to bring the 2007 session to a close by the end of this week.

The session began in early winter with a new Democratic governor - Chet Culver - exhorting a Legislature controlled by his party for the first time in 15 years to create a \$100 million Iowa Power Fund to supercharge Iowa's renewable energy industry.

The session is about to end with May flowers ready to bloom and lawmakers still trying to finish work on the research and development program.

Culver, even before he took office on Jan. 12, created a commission to come up with recommendations for reducing the property tax burden on Iowa businesses.

At the end of April, lawmakers are still searching for a consensus on the nettlesome tax issue.

Democrats and Republicans have also struggled during the session, at 105 days and counting, to reach agreement on new ways to enhance the safety of Iowans from sexual predators who target children while making a controversial law restricting where sex offenders can live more flexible.

"Time is running out and it's a big thing to chew on," said Sen. Keith Kreiman, a Bloomfield Democrat who heads the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Legislators have saved for last - as they usually do - the annual chore of passing a state budget that next year will grow by anywhere from 7.2 percent (according to Senate Democratic leaders) to 10 percent (according to Republican critics).



Unlikely to make the cut

Here are some high-profile proposals unlikely to win the Legislature's approval before lawmakers end the 2007 session:

- Extending anti-discrimination protections to gays and lesbians
- Allowing public employee unions to charge nonunion workers a fee for union services
- Creating a state sales tax devoted to school building improvements
- Boosting taxes, fees to raise more money for road construction
- Requiring livestock confinements to be farther from homes, tourism areas
- Allowing candidates for state office to obtain public financing of their campaigns if they forgo private fundraising.

Aside from spring fever, the expiration of lawmakers' daily expense allowance on Friday, the 110th day of the session, could give them an extra incentive to call it quits this week. Most receive a daily allowance of \$118 during the session. Those from Polk County get \$88.50.

"If we finish 15 minutes early, we'll be very, very happy," said House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, a Des Moines Democrat. "If we finish two hours late or a day late, we're not going to shed a tear over it. We don't want to rush it so much that we make mistakes."

Here's a closer look at some of the things on the Legislature's must-do list, as well as some of the issues lawmakers might still try to resolve and others that will likely have to wait another year.

- Iowa Power Fund. The House still must approve creation of the \$100 million fund - one of Culver's campaign promises. He wants few strings attached. Republican critics want more legislative direction.

Talking point: "The keystone of this session ... is we've appealed to a new generation of Iowa kids ... that are starting to say, 'Iowa is a happening place. Iowa is a place with an economic future,' " said Senate Majority Leader Mike Gronstal, a Council Bluffs Democrat.

- Budget. Lawmakers are working their way through bills allocating money for education, human services, state employee salaries and other key areas of the state budget. The \$960 million education spending bill still awaiting House action includes \$15 million for a new effort to expand preschool access and an extra \$25 million for state universities.

Talking point: Democrats "seem to be on a fast track to raise spending in this state by 20 percent. ... Ten percent this year and 10 percent next year," said House Minority Leader Christopher Rants, a Sioux City Republican.

- Property tax relief. A plan under consideration in the House would attack the problem of high commercial property taxes in several ways - including an assessment cap and a tax break for small businesses of up to \$320 a year. But the complexity of the issue and the limited amount of money budgeted for the tax relief effort could thwart the initiative.

Talking point: The Legislature is working with \$25 million "to solve a problem that's in the neighborhood of a billion dollars," said Gronstal.

- Sex offenders. A bill awaiting Senate debate would create "safe zones" around schools and child care centers, where sex offenders could not enter without permission. Lawmakers are likely to retain a law barring sex offenders from living within 2,000 feet of those facilities. Some Democratic legislators have proposed giving probation officers some discretion over offender restrictions. GOP leaders are resisting the idea.

Talking point: "My neighbors don't want parole officers to have discretion. They don't want sex offenders to live in their neighborhood, period," said Senate Minority Leader Mary Lundby, a Marion Republican.

- Community project incentives. Lawmakers say a large Internet company such as Google is weighing whether to locate part of its operation near Council Bluffs. The Senate will weigh proposed tax incentives to lure the company, approved by the House last week. Backers of Earthpark - a combination rain forest, aquarium and education center to be built near Pella - are trying to build support in the Legislature for a package of financial incentives for that project.

Talking point: "We need to encourage as many projects in Iowa like this if we want to grow our economy in a smart way," said Sen. Bill Dotzler, a Waterloo Democrat.

- Union fees. Democratic leaders say they haven't given up on rounding up enough votes in the House to pass a bill to allow public employee unions to charge nonunion workers a fee for services provided by the unions. Republicans and their business allies are strongly opposed.

Talking point: "We're still hopeful we can take it up. We'll just wait and see," said House Speaker Pat Murphy, a Dubuque Democrat.

- Hog confinements. A bill that would put more distance between new or expanding livestock farms and homes, water supplies and tourism areas has languished in the House after winning initial approval from the Environmental Protection Committee. Leaders say it will not be debated.

Talking point: "That's an area that has eluded consensus for a dozen years in Iowa. ... We will move forward on water quality and trying to clean up our rivers and streams," Gronstal said.

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