



## **Yepsen: Democrats still have a lot of work to do**

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April 15, 2007

The 2007 session of the Iowa Legislature is scheduled to adjourn in two weeks, but many issues important to the state's future are likely to be ignored.

So far, what the Democratic House, Senate and governor have done is a lot of easy stuff. Their inexperience in governing, plus a lack of public consensus, has kept them from doing even more.

Yes, they raised the minimum wage and the cigarette tax and are on track to increase teacher pay. Tougher issues are still in limbo:

- Discrimination. This Legislature has yet to approve anti-discrimination protections for gays and lesbians in housing and employment because of a political game House Republicans are playing.

They want Democrats to put up 51 votes from their members before any GOP lawmakers will vote for it. (This is being done so Democrats from conservative districts are on record casting a tough vote that will then be used against them by conservative Republican challengers in the 2008 election.)

- Road construction. Iowa needs more money for highway repair and new four-lane roads. But it's politically difficult to raise gas taxes when pump prices are so high.

Lawmakers could also increase registration fees or end the tax break for pickup trucks but they are afraid that, too, will alienate voters.

- School repair. Every county in Iowa has imposed a local option sales tax. A bill to make it a permanent, statewide tax so it is a more reliable source of money for school work is languishing. Opponents fear the money will someday be grabbed for something else.

It's a reasonable concern. That's why, in addition to approving the bill, the Legislature should also approve a constitutional amendment specifying that 1 cent of state sales-tax revenues can be used only for school construction or repair. Iowa has a similar constitutional protection requiring gas-tax money go just for road projects, and it's worked.

- Air and water quality. Much of Iowa stinks, and many lakes and rivers are polluted, thanks to the increasing number of hog lots and antiquated municipal sewer systems.

Local control of hog lots is a dead issue, despite the promises many Democrats made in their party platform and its popularity with voters. Other environmental bills are being tried instead, but they face tough going. This lack of meaningful work on environmental issues is likely to be the biggest failure of the 2007 session.

- Tax policy. Democrats are doing nothing to make the state income tax fairer or simpler. Nor are they re-examining the exemptions that have cobbled up the tax code over the years. Nor will they cut commercial property taxes much.

- New prisons. The experts say Iowa needs new facilities and capacity, yet some Democratic liberals would rather just let more criminals out of jail early.

So, if the governor and lawmakers can't do all these bills in the next two weeks, what's to be done?

They can keep working over the summer and fall. It's always true that the record of any Legislature is a two-year one, so they've still got the 2008 session before they have to face voters. Democrats should use the next eight months for some ambitious interim studies, task forces or summits on each of these issues to draft bills and move public opinion along.

One thing Democrats can't do is become over-confident. While it looks as if 2008 is going to be a good year for them, there's no guarantee they'll be back in the majority after the 2008 election.

At no point should a Democratic legislator say: "Oh, we'll wait until 2009."

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