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State News

AP News Analysis: Plenty of work left undone from session

By ANDREW DeMILLO
Sunday, April 8, 2007 12:43 AM CDT

LITTLE ROCK - As the Legislature wrapped up its 86-day session last week, Gov. Mike Beebe said lawmakers could be proud of the bills they killed as well as the ones they passed.

"Many times it's what you stopped from becoming bad laws rather than the good laws for which the people can be thankful," Beebe told House members Tuesday.

But as they look back on the session, lawmakers say there was plenty of good legislation that was also prevented from becoming law.

From regulating payday lending to imposing stricter penalties for animal cruelty, there are plenty of proposals that lawmakers said they wished they could have passed during the session.

Absent from the bills signed into law this session were efforts aimed at revamping the state's ethics and campaign finance laws.

Two bills and one proposed constitutional amendment focusing on ethics reform never made it out of the Legislature.

One measure that would have required lawmakers to wait a year after leaving office before becoming lobbyists stalled after House members amended it to apply to all sitting lawmakers, including ones exiting their positions due to term limits.

The Senate, which initially approved the bill, killed the measure after senators refused to agree to the House changes.

Likewise, the Senate balked at House Speaker Benny Petrus' ethics reform package that would have cut the maximum individual contributions to candidates in half, from \$2,000 to \$1,000. The measure also would have prevented contributors from giving money to candidates using more than one business they own.

Rep. Will Bond, who proposed a constitutional amendment that would have enacted similar ethics reforms, said passing such changes are difficult to do. Bond's proposal would have lengthened term limits for legislators along with the ethics package.

The effort was rejected by a joint legislative panel that reviewed proposed constitutional amendments.

"It would be a significant change from the way the Legislature is used to operating," said Bond, D-Jacksonville. "Any time you try to change something significantly, it's difficult. It just becomes very difficult to accomplish anything that creates significant change like that."

Another issue that failed to gain traction during the session was regulating payday lenders. Two competing measures focusing on the industry failed on either side of the Capitol.

A measure that would have fined payday lenders every time they charged interest above 17 percent won House approval but failed before a Senate committee. A separate proposal to

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regulate the industry _ but allow the lenders to continue the high interest rates _ won Senate approval but was rejected in the House after opponents said it would do little to help consumers.

Rep. David Johnson, who proposed the fines for the sometimes triple-digit loans, said he thinks there may be a chance to try again with increased regulations for payday lenders.

"I think it's a deadlock issue for the time being but I hope that there may be promise for it in the future," said Johnson, D-Little Rock.

The House and Senate also deadlocked on differing ideas for penalizing people convicted of animal cruelty. A measure that would have made animal cruelty a felony on the first offense won Senate approval but died in a House committee.

An alternate proposal that would have made it a felony on the second offense passed the House but was rejected by a Senate committee. That measure won the approval of the Arkansas Farm Bureau, which traditionally has objected to tougher animal cruelty penalties.

Sen. Sue Madison, who backed the stricter Senate bill, said she would like to hold public meetings to drum up more support for her bill.

"I would hope we could educate people more about this bill and let them know what this is trying to do," said Madison, D-Fayetteville.

One avenue supporters of failed measures are increasingly looking toward is the ballot box. Supporters of failed efforts to ban gay foster parents and to fund a statewide trauma system both say they're looking at gathering signatures to put their proposals on the ballot.

Lt. Gov. Bill Halter also is mulling a petition drive to place a proposed lottery to fund college scholarships and teacher bonuses on the November 2008 ballot.

Jerry Cox, director of the Arkansas Family Coalition, said the conservative advocacy group will decide in the coming weeks whether to gather signatures for a measure to ban homosexuals and unmarried couples from adopting or fostering children.

The measure, which would have reinstated a ban on gay foster parents struck down by the Supreme Court, won Senate approval but was rejected twice by a House panel.

"We're going to let the dust settle a little bit before we decide," said Cox, whose group helped draft the proposal. "We're probably going to do it, unless somebody can convince me otherwise."

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