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## As Minnesota Legislature wraps up, partisan differences hang on budget negotiations

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May 10--Proposals to restrict abortion rights, gun sales and cities' minimum wage hikes hang precariously in the balance during the final week of budget negotiations in the Minnesota Legislature.

But the chances of such measures becoming law this year are fading fast.

"A lot of policy is going to end up falling away," House Majority Leader Ryan Winkler, D-Golden Valley, said. "And some of it may be done in a negotiated fashion, but I don't see any of that happening until we have a broader fiscal deal."

Lobbyists and legislators acknowledge many of the particularly partisan priorities they fought for over the past five months will be eliminated in the next week or used as bargaining chips in major tax and spending talks.

Democratic Gov. Tim Walz and legislative leaders are scheduled to meet Sunday night to continue negotiations over the size of the next two-year state budget, the latest in a series of high-stakes budget discussions.

Walz said policy provisions have not been part of the talks so far.

"I continue to ask them: Are there ways that I can help you with policy issues that we can find common ground on that you need to see? And that is as far as that goes," he said.

Some of the most heavily disputed items of the session are still in play: fees on drug distributors and manufacturers to pay for opioid addiction, treatment and prevention, funding for cybersecurity efforts to protect the voting system, a gas tax increase, the extension of a 2% tax on medical providers and a public buy-in option intended to lower the cost of health care.

Others appear to have already fallen by the wayside, with legal recreational marijuana topping the list. The Senate rejected one marijuana measure, and a similar one in the House did not progress.

Both Senate Majority Leader Paul Gazelka and House Speaker Melissa Hortman said that as they and Walz develop overarching spending goals, legislators in conference committees can sort through policy items. The joint conference committees contain members of the DFL-led House and Republican-dominated Senate. Each committee works through a different budget area -- with policy differences hanging in the balance.

The committees should focus on finding common ground, said Gazelka, R-Nisswa, noting, "New policy -- on either side -- if they don't agree, doesn't happen."

Gazelka, a strong gun-rights proponent, singled out gun restrictions in the House version of a public safety and judiciary bill. The House provisions would expand background checks to gun shows and private sales and allow authorities to remove guns from people considered to be a danger to themselves or others.

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Minnesota Gun Owners Caucus political director Rob Doar said the Senate version of the public safety bill lacks such "compet programs," which makes it harder for the Democrats to try to negotiate on gun control.

"It really becomes the DFL decision to see which hill they want to die on for which policy items," he said.

Protect Minnesota Executive Director Nancy Nord Bence, who is advocating for the laws, said Republicans are working to strip the language from the final compromise bill. But she believes there's still a chance gun control changes could be added in a final deal.

"We all know that at the end of session lots of things can get done quickly if they want them to get done quickly," she said.

Some of the biggest budget questions of this year are being debated in the health and human services conference committee, but members are also tackling a number of lower-cost but highly disputed policy ideas. One of those would ban abortions after 20 weeks post-fertilization.

Planned Parenthood has been lobbying against the measure and will continue to do so through this final week, spokeswoman Jennifer Aulwes said. She is hopeful it will not end up in the final bill but said activists have generally reached a point of "wait and see."

Supporters of the 20-week ban are also unsure of the odds, given the strong opposition of Walz and House Democrats, said Paul Stark of Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life, a group that opposes abortion rights. He said it could end up as some sort of bargaining chip.

Meanwhile, the jobs and energy conference committee is weighing two particularly divisive measures.

The Senate's version of a spending bill contains a provision to block cities from setting or enforcing their own employment laws, including raising the minimum wage and regulating scheduling or paid leave. That would impact any local regulations enacted January 2017 or after, effectively repealing the ordinances in St. Paul and Minneapolis.

House Democrats included statewide paid family and medical leave in their plan. Under the proposal, workers would continue to receive at least partial pay if they take time off to care for a sick family member or new baby. An income tax on employees and employers would pay for the benefit.

Sen. Eric Pratt, R-Prior Lake, said he believes a deal could be struck on legislation addressing employer wage theft, a policy area that he said he is "absolutely confident that we can come to an agreement on." As for paid family leave and uniform statewide labor laws, he said this might not be the right year.

"If we can come to an agreement on policy, great. But this is a budget year and the focus has got to be on the budget items. And we can do policy next year," Pratt said.

Paid leave advocates have no plans to give up their fight. They will be making their last push over the next week.

Volunteers plan to knock on 30,000 doors -- largely in Senate Republican districts -- and encourage Minnesotans to call their legislators and ask them to support paid leave and some other policies, said Lars Negstad with the faith-based group Isaiah. The organization's political arm, Faith in Minnesota, is leading that outreach.

Many DFL-aligned unions also have been making phone calls, door knocking and airing digital ads to support policies like paid leave, Negstad said.

"We really think the time is this year to get it done," he said.

[Vote Yes-SNAP \(.../take-action;jsessionid=node012jvhndxjn7rk1fytbv03nmvengagementId=500666\)](#)

United Way Worldwide applauds Congress for reaching a bipartisan compromise on the Farm Bill. While the bill is not perfect, it represents a step in the right direction on SNAP, which provides essential food support for children, people with disabilities, older Americans and veterans. With United Way's support of the bipartisan SNAP provisions in the final agreement, we encourage Members of Congress to vote yes on the conference report.

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Jobs and energy committee co-chair Rep. Tim Mahoney, D-St. Paul, said it is hard to predict whether paid family leave, minimum-wage pre-emption and other labor provisions could end up in the final negotiating mix.

“Those are two very difficult issues, and any legislator worth their salt puts bargaining chips in,” Mahoney said. “Some will fall by the wayside. Some will surprise us.”

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