

POLITICS

Minnesota gun control proposals hit obstacle in conference committee

Proposals fail to advance in surprise conference vote on public safety spending.

By **Stephen Montemayor** (<http://www.startribune.com/stephen-montemayor/298000161/>) Star Tribune

MAY 15, 2019 — 5:38AM

Two gun-control measures deemed a top priority by Minnesota DFL lawmakers this session were dealt an all-but-fatal blow Tuesday after they failed to advance on a party-line vote.

Coming after three hours of debate, the result appeared to stymie efforts by gun-control advocates to expand criminal-background checks to private gun sales and create a “red flag” law that would allow authorities to temporarily confiscate firearms from people considered a threat to themselves or others.

The gun proposals, similar to federal proposals that have divided Congress, came to a head when Sen. Warren Limmer, R-Maple Grove, called for a vote on whether to add them to a broader spending bill being assembled by members from both the House and Senate.

The gambit paid off for Limmer, who earlier expressed deep reservations about both policy proposals: Members of the joint conference committee on the public safety budget split 5-5 along party lines and failed to add either measure to the spending bill.

“I’ve always regarded controversial policies in budget bills as something we really shouldn’t do because it gums up the work,” Limmer said after Tuesday’s meeting. “Let’s tear the Band-Aid off and get at it.”

The call for a vote appeared to surprise some lawmakers. But Rep. Carlos Mariani, DFL-St. Paul, said afterward that he was not surprised by the result. Mariani, who co-chairs the conference committee with Limmer, noted that other lawmakers on the panel could still revive the gun measures before they finish work on the public safety budget. But Tuesday’s outcome, and the deep divisions over gun rights, signaled that expanded background checks and red-flag legislation is likely a dead issue for 2019.

“Technically this could come back at any point in time,” said Mariani. “But I don’t think this was a surprise here in terms of how this vote turned out, and I don’t expect that vote frankly to change.”

The gun vote was the first taken up by the end-of-session conference committee, which is tasked with reconciling vast differences between the House and Senate public safety spending bills.

Addressing gun violence has been a top priority for the new DFL House majority, backed by a growing number of local gun-safety groups that have become more active in the aftermath of the 2018 high school shooting in Parkland, Fla. But the DFL-backed gun restrictions have so far failed to pick up momentum in the Republican-led Senate, where Limmer declined to schedule hearings.

The DFL-led House held several hearings on both proposals before attaching them to the public safety spending bill. One measure would expand criminal background checks to cover private firearm transfers, including those that take place at gun shows or online. Exceptions were included to allow transfers between close relatives, hunting companions or members of organized scholastic sports like trap shooting.

A separate plan to create a new law allowing extreme risk protection orders, commonly referred to as “red flag” laws, also was changed so that only law enforcement officers or prosecutors could petition judges to remove firearms from people deemed dangerous.

GALLERY

GRID

1/17



Sides.

GLEN STUBBE • STAR TRIBUNE

Activists filled an overflow room Tuesday as a conference committee debated the gun measures, with Sen. Ron Latz on screen.

The original bill would have permitted relatives to petition for confiscation, something gun-rights proponents and some legislators feared could lead to false reports among disgruntled family members.

Both measures were backed by Minnesota law enforcement leaders. The Minnesota Police and Peace Officers Association and the Minnesota Sheriffs' Association wrote a letter to lawmakers Tuesday saying the gun measures were "tailored to have the most strategic impact on gun violence while minimizing the burden to law-abiding gun owners."

The vote drew a packed crowd of activists on both sides of the gun issue. Representatives from the Minnesota Gun Owners Caucus and National Rifle Association testified against the measures. Opponents underlined concerns over what they described as disproportionate penalties and a lack of due process.

Rep. Dave Pinto, DFL-St. Paul, chief author of the background check bill, later characterized the vote as an effort by Minnesota Republicans to stymie new gun legislation.

"Today, they chose not to move forward on two gun-safety measures despite broad public support," Pinto said. "That is deeply disappointing to thousands of families who have been touched by gun violence and expect action."

Limmer acknowledged the issue of gun safety will not recede anytime soon. While he said the House proposals needed further scrutiny, Sen. Ron Latz, DFL-St. Louis Park, the author of similar gun-control measures in the Senate, noted that his two companion bills were rejected in Limmer's committee each of the past two sessions.

Gun-safety activists predicted that the two measures will almost certainly be revived in 2020 when lawmakers return to craft policy before Senate elections. Limmer dismissed the electoral threat.

"The proponents like to use fear tactics to make me think that there's some buzz saw out there in suburban districts," Limmer said. "My concern is writing good law. My concern is writing proportional consequences as well as following constitutional principles as we try to satisfy public safety."

Stephen Montemayor covers politics and government in Minnesota. He previously reported on federal courts and law enforcement for the Star Tribune.

stephen.montemayor@startribune.com 612-673-1755 smontemayor