

CAPITOL NEWS UPDATE

WEEK OF APRIL 12, 2021



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& ASSOCIATES

SENATE GOP ELECTION PACKAGE STIRS ONGOING PARTISAN BATTLE

Senate Republicans are prepared for an ongoing partisan fight after recently introducing a sweeping 39-bill package that proposes substantial election law changes to improve the state's election law processes and preserve the integrity of the vote. The bill has been severely criticized by Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson.

Proposed changes in the package include:

- Increased security requirements for absentee ballot drop boxes.
- Training requirements for poll challengers.
- Allowing for the recording and public viewing of election audits.
- Banning the secretary of state from mass mailing absentee ballot applications to all eligible voters.
- A requirement that the Board of State Canvassers complete the canvass of all initiative petitions within 100 days of the petitions being submitted to the state. If deemed sufficient, the petition must immediately be forwarded to the Legislature for consideration.

The bills come on the heels of other similar bills introduced in legislatures across the U.S. as Republicans say that all voters should “have confidence in free and fair elections” – in reference to the 2020 election. Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson and other Michigan election officials argue that the 2020 election was fair and accurate.

The bill was referred to the Senate Elections Committee which is chaired by former Michigan Secretary of State and current Sen. Ruth Johnson (R-Holly).

Senate Majority Leader Mike Shirkey has said there is room for negotiation, but that the proposed package is necessary because of widespread public suspicions of the presidential election results. "That's just something we can't live with. At the very least we've got to make sure people when they go to the poll or when they execute their vote on their absentee ballot that they're confident in a) it's legitimate and b) it's going to be counted," Shirkey said.

Secretary of State Benson said earlier this week that the package is “poisonous” and “unAmerican.”

"These proposals are based on the lies that sought to undermine the will of the voters in our democracy last year. And they should be seen for what they are: an extension of those same lies, seeking to continue to undermine the will of Michigan citizens," she said on Thursday.

Among other things, Benson took issue with the bills requiring applicants for absentee ballots to attach a copy of identification; a bill which would give county board of canvassers the power to

approve absentee voter drop boxes; and a proposed bill that would prevent local clerks from pre-paying postage on the return envelopes for absentee ballots and would bar voters from using absentee ballot drop boxes after 5 p.m. on the day before Election Day.

If Governor Gretchen Whitmer opposes the bills, The Michigan Republican Party has said it will turn the plans into a legislative initiative to put the proposal into law.

COVID-19 IS A ‘RUNAWAY TRAIN’ IN THE STATE, BUT NO NEW RESTRICTIONS

Despite pressure from the Federal government including the head of the CDC to reinstate restrictions in Michigan, Gov. Whitmer has said the state is not planning to issue new health and safety restrictions even though Michigan is fighting its third COVID-19 surge and a worst-in-the-nation COVID rate.

The state’s seven-day average for newly confirmed coronavirus cases was 7,006, which is close to the state’s all-time-high from late November.

Whitmer said the state is using “every mitigation strategy” it has to fight COVID-19, and encouraged residents to “do what we know works.” As the state with some of the strongest protocols in place including capacity restrictions and a mask mandate, Whitmer said the surge is due to a combination of things including high prevalence of the spread of the more contagious B.1.1.7 variant, pandemic “fatigue” with residents who no longer want to wear masks or social distance, and increased mobility.

Whitmer appeared on ABC News Live and MSNBC and said the strategy now is to encourage people to wear masks, social distance, avoid large gatherings and eating indoors, and get vaccinated. Progress will depend on "whether or not the citizens take this seriously and do their part," she said.

Also, the state is trying to increase the distribution of additional doses of monoclonal antibodies by increasing the number of infusion sites. The treatment includes proteins made in a laboratory that help the immune system fight off pathogens. The treatment can block the COVID-19 spike protein from attaching to and entering human cells.

The White House has said that the federal government will increase the number of monoclonal antibodies available to Michigan and support the state’s efforts to increase testing and staff to administer vaccines. The Federal government, according to Whitmer, is also sending remdesivir, and antiviral medication to the state, that can help ease recovery.

"We've got to make use of the moment — of access to vaccines, of monoclonal antibodies, masking," she said. "These are the things that will help keep us safe until we get more of our residents vaccinated."

Senate Majority Leader Mike Shirkey (R-Clarklake) and House Speaker Jason Wentworth (R-Farwell), both publicly praised the Governor for not calling for new restrictions.

WHITMER PLAN FOR SPENDING STIMULUS DOLLARS CALLS FOR “TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE”

Gov. Whitmer outlined priorities for the State of Michigan this week, for spending the \$18.8 billion in federal stimulus dollars from the American Rescue Plan Act.

The money is part of a \$1.9 trillion federal American Rescue Plan Act, which also provided stimulus checks and canceled taxes on unemployment payments. The stimulus funds are for states to fill gaps in revenue which are due to the pandemic.

Whitmer said she will engage with the Legislature, local governments, school districts and other stakeholders to prioritize spending, with a focus on using the funds for “transformational change.”

"The American Rescue Plan could lead to transformational change and that's what we have to be thinking about with this incredible opportunity. Change on issues that we share a lot of common ground on. The funds can be spent, and should be spent, in a sustainable way without creating budget challenges in the future," she said. "And all the policies we pursue should center equity in responding to the economic and health issues created and exacerbated by COVID and leverage local and public dollars to have widespread impact."

State government is expected to receive \$5.7 billion from the funding, local government expects to receive \$4.4 billion, and K-12 schools would receive \$3.9 billion, \$1 billion for higher education and \$1.1 billion for childcare providers and families. An additional \$250 million would be put toward a state capital project fund. The budget office has also allocated \$1.2 billion to coronavirus testing and \$92 million for vaccine administration. An additional \$523 million for rental and utility assistance and \$260 million in mortgage assistance would be used.

Whitmer's priorities include:

Education – Using the funds to address learning loss from the pandemic, provide wraparound services, including for mental health, and improve teacher recruitment and retention. Also expanding access to preschool and childcare and creating safe learning environments.

Economy – Help businesses as they continue to recover. Grant programs for small businesses, support for Michigan's community development financial institutions, creation of a small business accelerator to provide startup capital and support for entrepreneurs. Attracting efforts to invest in future technologies, mobility and advanced vehicle research and development. Expanding the Michigan Reconnect program for the workforce.

Infrastructure – Supplement existing investments and improvements for clean drinking water, broadband, cleaner air, public green space and climate-resilient dams.

Public Health – Expand capacity and access to health care and behavioral health support.

Senate Majority Leader Mike Shirkey said that Whitmer should've brought her priorities to the Legislature before going through the press.

House Appropriations Chair Rep. Thomas Albert (R-Lowell) said the House would provide a more specific plan.

TEXTING WHILE DRIVING CHANGES DEBATED

House Bill 4277, sponsored by Rep. Mari Manoogian (D-Birmingham), would ban the use of handheld devices while driving in most circumstances if passed. The bill was taken up by the House Judiciary Committee this week. The bills would mean the first violation would be a civil infraction with a \$100 fine, and the second or subsequent violations would have a \$250 fine.

The House has taken up similar legislation in the recent past. The state's current distracted driving law bans texting while driving. Supporters of the legislation say it is difficult for police to see if a driver is texting or doing something else on a phone.

Rep. Manoogian said that the CDC reports "nearly 40 percent of teens still engage in texting while driving."

Rep. Joe Bellino (R-Monroe) also introduced HB 4278 to give points against drivers' license records instead of fines. In addition, Rep. Mike Mueller (R-Linden) introduced HB 4279 to prohibit drivers with a level 1 or 2 graduated driver's license from using a phone at all while driving.

Opponents of the bill include Rep. Steve Johnson who noted personal experience with an older car that does not have hands-free technology. Others said the fines are not enough to dissuade someone.

MM&A BRIEFS

STATE REP. JEWELL JONES CHARGED WITH RESISTING POLICE, DRUNKEN AND RECKLESS DRIVING

State rep. Jewell Jones (D-Inkster), is facing several charges related to an incident that happened last week on I-96 in Livingston County, including drunken driving, and resisting and obstructing a police officer. Jones, 25, could face up to two years in prison for resisting and 93 days for the other charges.

HOSPITALS NEARING FULL CAPACITY

Beaumont Health is reporting that its hospitals are currently at 95 percent capacity because of the recent surge in COVID-19 patients. COVID-19 Hospitalizations overall remaining high with over 2,000 daily COVID-related emergency department visits. Henry Ford Health System is also reporting that their hospitals are around 90 percent capacity.

SEVERAL SECRETARY OF STATE BRANCHES CLOSED DUE TO COVID-19

A total of nine Secretary of State branches have temporarily closed in April due to COVID-19 exposures. The branch locations include Troy, Dearborn, Howell, Newberry, Wyoming, Owosso, Lansing and West Branch.

BILLS PROPOSE CONSOLIDATING PRIMARY ELECTIONS

A package of bipartisan bills passed out of the House Elections and Ethics Committee this week, that would consolidate May and August elections in Michigan into a single June primary date. The bills are designed to give clerks more time between the August primary and November general election and to help communities who have three elections in a year, save money. Opponents of the bills say that the timing would raise challenges for bond issues and debt millages, and candidates running grassroots campaigns.

CALENDAR OF IMPORTANT EVENTS

- April 20** **Rep. David Martin (R-Davison) Fundraiser**
Location: 8 a.m. Karoub Associates, Lansing
- Rep. Richard Steenland (D-Roseville) CTE**
Location: 4:30 p.m. Michigan Beer and Wine Wholesalers Association, Lansing
- April 21** **Rep. Kyra Harris Bolden (D-Southfield) for State Rep**
Location: 8 a.m., Michigan Beer and Wine Wholesalers Association, Lansing
- Rep. Darrin Camilleri (D-Brownstown Township) Breakfast Reception**
Location: 10 a.m., Michigan Beer and Wine Wholesalers Association, Lansing
- Rep. Tyrone Carter (D-Detroit) Spring Reception**
Location: 11:30 a.m., Karoub Associates, Lansing
- Sen. Kim LaSata (R) PAC Fundraiser**
Location: 5 p.m., Michigan Beer and Wine Wholesalers Association, Lansing
- April 22** **Rep. Steve Carra (R-Three Rivers) Fundraiser**
Location: 7:30 a.m., Karoub Associates, Lansing
- Rep. Joe Tate (D-Detroit) Leadership PAC**
Location: 4:30 p.m., Michigan Beer and Wine Wholesalers Association, Lansing
- Friends of Rep. Bryan Posthumus (R-Oakfield Twp.)**
Location: 5 p.m., Knickerbocker, 417 Bridge St., North West, Grand Rapids
- April 27** **Rep. Mark Tisdell (R-Rochester Hills) Fundraiser**
Location: 7:30 a.m., Michigan Beer and Wine Wholesalers Association, Lansing

- April 27** **Sen. Dan Lauwers (R) Majority Fund**
Location: 12:30 p.m., Karoub Associates, Lansing
- Rep. Greg VanWoerkom's (R-Norton Shores) King's Day 2021 Reception**
Location: 5 p.m., Michigan Beer and Wine Wholesalers Association, Lansing
- April 28** **Rep. Roger Hauck (R-Mt. Pleasant) Reception**
Location: 8 a.m., Michigan Beer and Wine Wholesalers Association, Lansing
- Rep. Laurie Pohutsky (D-Livonia) - Birthday Garden Party**
Location: 11:30 a.m., Michigan Beer and Wine Wholesalers Association, Lansing
- Rep. Tulio Liberati (D-Allen Park) Fundraiser**
Location: 5 p.m., Michigan Beer and Wine Wholesalers Association, Lansing
- April 29** **Rep. Steve Carra (R-Three Rivers) Fundraiser**
Location: 7:30 a.m., Karoub Associates, Lansing
- Sen. Ed McBroom (R) - Memorial Honoring Sen. Casperson & Frank Egeler**
Location: 8:30 a.m., Senate Committee Room, Boji Tower, Lansing
- Sen. Tom Barrett (R) - Barrett Brigade Leadership Fund**
Location: 12 p.m., Karoub Associates, Lansing