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Voter ID bill likely to be law
Perdue regrets failure of 'faith-based initiative'

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Gov. Sonny Perdue indicated Friday he's likely to sign a bill that would require voters to show a photo ID at the polls, but he has problems with legislation that would ban smoking in many public places.

The Republican governor praised the performance of Georgia's first GOP-controlled Legislature in 130 years, but said his biggest disappointment was lawmakers' failure to pass his "faith-based initiative." The proposal, which would allow religious organizations that provide social services to compete for state dollars, died in the Senate after a partisan fight over the possibility that the measure's language would open the door to school vouchers.

"The disappointment was to see something like this to come down to a partisan issue," Perdue told reporters the day after the Legislature adjourned for the year. "And there was no reason for something like this to be a partisan issue."

Smoking ban concerns

Perdue will be signing into law dozens of bills over the next month or so, including legislation that mandates a 24-hour waiting period for abortion, a 47-page ethics reform bill, a major restructuring of the state Department of Motor Vehicle Safety, a bill to set up a referendum on whether to incorporate Sandy Springs and legislation to revamp how child support payments are calculated. Perdue signed a bill capping medical malpractice awards just days after it was approved early in the session.

The governor also has the option of vetoing bills, of course. He did not say he would veto the smoking bill, but he expressed reservations.

Perdue seemed hesitant about a bill that would ban smoking in many eateries. The bill exempts bars and restaurants that don't employ minors.

"This is a tough one for me personally," Perdue said. "I haven't finally decided. I am very concerned with government be the end-all and be-all nanny for all people. I'm troubled by this, but I have huge respect for the passion for the health care argument."

Exhibit G - 1

Among the bills that didn't pass this year was a proposal to require couples to wait longer to get a divorce, a bill outlawing the importation of pit bulls into the state and a bill that would permit lottery tickets to be sold online.

Perdue said he will pursue the faith-based bill again next year, the second phase of a two-year General Assembly. Bills that failed this year can be carried over until the next legislative term.

Legislators adjourned at midnight Thursday, one day shy of their traditional 40th day exit from the Capitol. Republican leaders wanted an early adjournment to demonstrate they can run state government more efficiently than Democrats, though it took them till midnight to do it.

Democratic leaders criticized the GOP for many of its initiatives this year, including a delay in class-size reduction and a budget that trimmed some low-income children from state health care.

"It's clear the priorities of the Republican leadership in the House, Senate and executive branch — lock out health care to children, postpone any improvement in education and close-out access and transparency on how public dollars are being spent," said state Rep. DuBose Porter (D-Dublin), minority leader in the House.

No qualms on ID bill

Republicans looked a lot like feuding Democrats of sessions past, when they locked horns over Perdue's ethics package on the session's final day. They arrived at a compromise that was approved minutes before legislators adjourned.

"The ethics bill is a good strong one," Perdue said. "It doesn't include everything I wanted, but that's how the process up here works."

The bill prohibits former lawmakers from immediately returning to the Capitol in lucrative lobbyists jobs, and it increases ethics fines. But it does not contain a limit on lobbyists' gifts to lawmakers, and critics have complained about a self-policing mechanism in the bill that sets up a committee of lawmakers to oversee conflict-of-interest complaints. Perdue had wanted those complaints investigated by the State Ethics Commission.

Perdue said he has no qualms about signing into law one of the most controversial pieces of legislation passed this year, a requirement that voters produce a photo ID at the polls. The bill eliminates nearly a dozen permissible forms of ID currently allowed at Georgia polls, including birth certificates and utility bills.

Republican sponsors argued photo IDs are needed to cut down on voter fraud. Critics, especially African-American legislators, said it is unnecessary and discriminates against minorities and the elderly. Some critics predict the measure will be rejected by the U.S. Justice Department, which must review the measure for compliance with the Voting Rights Act.

"I think it's appropriate," Perdue said of the bill. "I believe in the integrity of the voting process. And I don't think it's disenfranchising whatsoever to require that."

The governor estimated that about 300,000 Georgians 18 or older don't have a driver's license, one of the pieces of photo ID that would be allowed at polls. About 50,000 of those people are incarcerated, he said.

"I think we ought to be proactive in helping our citizens who don't have a photo ID to get one, and get it quickly, conveniently and essentially at no cost," he said.

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