

COVID-19 forces state lawmakers to cancel veto session

By Doug Finke

The State Journal-Register/Posted November 10, 2020 at 6:3 P.M.

With cases of coronavirus surging in the state, the House and Senate will cancel the veto session.

In a memo to House members Tuesday afternoon, Jessica Basham, chief of staff to House Speaker Michael Madigan, said there is a possibility that other session dates will be scheduled. For now, though, the session days scheduled for Nov. 17-19 and Dec. 1-3 have been canceled.

“There is a strong majority of members who would prefer the House delay convening to a later day,” Basham said in her memo. “This is primarily motivated by concerns about the rising COVID-19 rates and proximity to upcoming holidays. I’m advised that there are similar concerns among Senate members who were also surveyed over the weekend.”

The state has seen steadily increasing coronavirus cases, setting another daily record for new cases on Tuesday. Likewise, Sangamon County has set records for cases recently as the virus has shown a resurgence after a relatively quiet summer.

Senate President Don Harmon, D-Oak Park, specifically cited the number of cases diagnosed in Springfield.

“The front page in today’s Springfield paper warns of a COVID ‘tsunami’ sweeping the region and its health care system,” Harmon said in a statement. “This is not the time to physically bring together hundreds of people from all around the state. It’s not safe or responsible to have a legislative session under these circumstances.”

Harmon cited the city’s rolling average positivity rate that hit 14.4% recently. An 8% positivity rate triggers mitigations. He also noted concerns about hospital capacity because of the increased caseload.

“The health and safety of the people who work for and serve in the Illinois General Assembly, and their respective families, is paramount,” Madigan said in a statement. “We will continue to monitor the situation, consult medical experts and do intend to schedule additional session days so we can finish our important work.”

Newly elected lawmakers will be sworn into office January 14. That makes the final day for the current legislature January 13. Additional session days could be scheduled in early January before the new General Assembly takes its seats.

Just hours before the memo surfaced, Gov. JB Pritzker said he would find it “disappointing” if the session were scheduled because there is still work for lawmakers to do. Among other things, Pritzker has said “deep and painful cuts” must be made to the budget because the graduated income tax amendment failed.

The coronavirus pandemic severely curtailed the spring legislative session, limiting the number of bills passed by the General Assembly. None of those bills were vetoed so that was not going to be part of the fall agenda this year.

The Illinois Legislative Black Caucus has held a series of hearings through the fall to develop bills that address systemic racism and social justice. At one point, the idea was to try passing those bills during the veto session.

Sen. Kimberly Lightford, D-Maywood, chair of the ILBC, said she agrees with the decision to postpone the session.

“We are still in the midst of a pandemic and COVID-19 cases are surging across the state, making the risk too high for the General Assembly to gather at this time,” she said in a statement. “While we will not be able to pass legislation as soon as we hoped, the urgency to bring an end to systemic racism remains.”

Shortly before the cancellation announcement, several House Republicans called on Democratic representatives to vote against Madigan when he runs again for speaker. Rep. Avery Bourne of Morrisonville said a cancellation of the veto session would show that Madigan is weak.

“This shows that Speaker Madigan, if he chooses to not to have veto session, doesn’t want to get his caucus together because he has such an issue of not being able to have the confidence of his own caucus,” Bourne said. “If it is canceled, that’s a strong signal that the speaker is weak.”

Although several House Democrats have said they will not vote for Madigan again as speaker, he still appears to have enough votes to be reelected to the post. He must be reelected to the post when the new General Assembly is sworn in.

Bourne and other House Republicans said rank and file Democrats should pledge to vote for someone else for speaker and that constituents of those lawmakers should also pressure the legislators.

The Springfield area’s sole Democratic House member, Rep. Sue Scherer of Decatur, did not respond to a call.

Contact Doug Finke: doug.finke@sj-r.com, 788-1527