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California GOP legislators blocked 20 bills after demands were unmet

Among the lost bills were keeping domestic-violence shelters open and helping counties prepare for swine flu. Republicans wanted free tax preparation for poor people eliminated.

By Shane Goldmacher and Patrick McGreevy

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Reporting from Sacramento

A plan to keep dozens of domestic-violence shelters from closing sailed out of the state Assembly late Friday night with nary a no vote. Yet hours later, the bill lay in the legislative trash heap, one of many lost to politics as lawmakers reached the deadline for completing their work this year.

Republicans in the Senate blocked more than 20 bills -- all needing GOP votes to pass, many approved by the lower house with bipartisan or near-unanimous support -- to leverage a trio of unrelated demands. Chief among those was the elimination of a program that allowed mostly low-income Californians to have the state do their tax returns free, something the maker of TurboTax has been trying to achieve for years.



The other demands, which Democrats say they were willing to meet, were putting a Republican name on a popular bill and tweaking corporate tax breaks passed months ago.

"This is what they hold out for?" exasperated Senate leader Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento) said shortly after 3 a.m. Saturday.

One by one, bills to keep the shelters open, help counties prepare for the next swine flu outbreak and blunt the effect of the state's raid on local funds, among others, fell as GOP senators refused to vote.

There's no policy dispute, most involved agreed, though Republicans said the blockade wasn't so much about the demands as the principle of trust. Democrats, they said, broke promises that had sealed the summer's budget pact.

"The point here is not one, two or three issues," said Senate GOP leader Dennis Hollingsworth (R-Murrieta). "The point is one issue: We have to be able to abide by agreements."

Sen. Mark Leno (D-San Francisco) accused Republicans of "extortion" as important legislation failed. Though Democrats hold the majority in each house, the disputed bills all required a two-thirds majority for various reasons. Some Republican votes are needed to reach that mark, which gave the GOP a veto power.

Steinberg did not dispute that he promised Republicans that the Senate would consider scrapping ReadyReturn, the state tax program, which in the end the upper house refused to do. But Steinberg still bristled at the GOP obstruction.

"The inside political game here does not matter to the people," he said.

It matters a great deal to interest groups. Intuit, which makes TurboTax, has spent \$618,000 on lobbying in Sacramento since 2007 and donated to the campaigns of 29 of the 40 state senators since 2005.

In 2006, the company spent \$1 million trying to elect Tony Strickland (R-Moorpark) as state controller. He lost that race but is now a senator who took part in Friday's blockade.

Strickland said he did not see any conflict of interest in holding out for the dismantling of ReadyReturn.

"I've always thought it was wrong to use taxpayer dollars to compete with private enterprise," he said.

Tara Shabazz, director of the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence, said she was unhappy to be collateral damage amid the partisan warfare.

"To find out that we got caught up in petty politics is disheartening," she said.

The measure to allot \$16 million to shelters passed 76 to 0 in the Assembly. But it died in the Senate even with two GOP senators as coauthors.

"It was a tremendous let-down," said Sen. Leland Yee (D-San Francisco), whose name was on the measure, SBX3 13, until it was stripped off in a spat among Democrats.

Six shelters across the state have already closed. Other items caught in the blockade:

* A measure to ease borrowing for cities and counties. The state took \$1.9 billion of their funds this summer and has three years to repay it. Municipalities hope to borrow from Wall Street to bridge the gap. The failure of SB 67, by the Senate budget committee, will cost cities and counties about \$200 million more to do that, said Paul McIntosh, executive director of the California State Assn. of Counties. That makes more cuts to police and fire departments likely, he said.

* Federal money for the next swine flu outbreak. SB 769, by Sen. Elaine Alquist (D-Santa Clara), would have distributed federal funds to counties. Local agencies could now lose out on at least \$42 million in newly allocated funds, and possibly tens of millions more in future grants, said Bruce Pomer, executive director of the Health Officers Assn. of California.

* A hospital fee to bring in more than \$2 billion in federal funds for healthcare. The sponsor of AB 1383, Assemblyman Dave Jones (D-Sacramento), circumvented the blockade by changing his measure to remove the need for GOP support. But more legislation will now be needed before the funds can be secured.

Most of the stalled bills can be taken up later, Hollingsworth said. Lawmakers are expected to return soon to Sacramento for special fall sessions on several issues.

"There's nothing to be alarmed about here," he said.

Still, the bickering and the stymied programs have left a poor aftertaste.

"I'm still sick to my stomach," said Sen. Abel Maldonado (R-Santa Maria), the lone GOP lawmaker who broke ranks to support many of the blockaded bills. "I just felt that we were going to give away a whole forest for a tree."

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