Mining Company Is Pulling Out of Wisconsin

TODD RICHMOND, Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — Wisconsin Republicans' push to kick-start an iron mine in northwestern Wisconsin crashed to a halt Tuesday after GOP senators failed to muster enough support during a floor session.

Within hours, the head of the mining company looking to open the mine said the project was being dropped due to inaction by the Legislature.

Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, was forced to yank the bill off the day's calendar and sent it back to committee. The move puts Republicans in a time crunch if they hope to get any legislation passed before the session ends next week and lawmakers leave Madison for the campaign trail.

"We're at that tipping point now," Fitzgerald told reporters later. "This evasive 17th vote is getting harder and harder to find."

Republicans have touted the mining bill as their signature job creation legislation this session. They hold a 17-16 majority in the Senate, meaning they need everyone in their caucus to support the measure. But Sen. Dale Schultz, a moderate Republican from Richland Center, has vowed to vote against the measure, saying it makes challenging state regulators' permitting decisions too difficult and jeopardizes the environment.

Republican leaders have spent the last week trying to come up with a compromise to get Schultz on board. But Schultz hasn't budged.

Fitzgerald put the bill on the Senate's calendar anyway, sparking speculation the GOP had convinced a Democrat to switch sides and support the bill. The GOP opened the floor debate by offering up a revised bill to appease Schultz. The attempt failed 16-17 with Schultz and all 16 Democrats presenting a united front. Fitzgerald then moved to pull the bill back to committee rather than force a vote on the original version and watch the bill fail.

Schultz told senators he was still open to discussions but "today is not the day for this compromise. The people of this state have said over and over again, loudly and clearly, they're not against mining but they want it done in an environmentally safe and sustainable way."

Now the measure's future looks even bleaker. The legislative session ends March 15, meaning Senate Republicans would have to pass some kind of compromise and Assembly Republicans would have to concur in a span of just days.

Republican leaders could call the Legislature back for an extra session, but Fitzgerald said that would be difficult because half the senators and all state

representatives will be out campaigning for November's elections. Fitzgerald and three other GOP senators could face recall elections this summer over their support for Gov. Scott Walker's divisive collective bargaining law, which stripped most public workers of their union rights.

And even if the Legislature reconvenes, the bill won't go anywhere unless Schultz or a Senate Democrat has a change of heart.

Gogebic Taconite President Bill Williams issued a statement late Tuesday saying the company was leaving the state because the Senate sent a "clear message that Wisconsin will not welcome iron mining. We get the message."

Assembly Speaker Jeff Fitzgerald, R-Horicon, Scott Fitzgerald's brother, said Assembly Republicans are done compromising because the Gogebic Taconite won't accept any more concessions.

"Sen. Schultz and the Democrats decided to stand with environmentalists against job creators," he said. "We let something slip away."

Republicans have been working for a year on legislation to help Florida-based Gogebic Taconite open a giant open-pit mine in the Penokee Hills just south of Lake Superior. The company has promised the mine will create hundreds of jobs for economically depressed northwestern Wisconsin and boost the state's mining equipment manufacturing sector.

But the company has put its plans on hold until lawmakers can guarantee a stopping point in the state's open-ended mine permitting process.

Environmentalists, meanwhile, warn the mine will pollute one of the most pristine areas left in the state. A fierce debate over how to best balance jobs and the environment has ensued.

Assembly Republicans passed a bill in January that would require the state Department of Natural Resources to make a permit decision within a year of receiving an application. It also would eliminate contested case hearings, quasi-judicial proceedings the public can use to challenge decisions leading up to final approval. Republicans say the hearings often become frivolous and slow the approval process.

Schultz said any bill must protect the environment and include contested case hearings.

Republicans who control the Legislature's budget committee offered Schultz on Monday a package of revisions that would add an additional 120 days to the approval deadline. Gogebic Taconite would have to enhance or restore wetlands in northern Wisconsin, a departure from original language that allowed the company to improve wetlands anywhere in the state. Contested case hearings could still take place, but they could be held only after the DNR had given the company a permit.

Fitzgerald said he scheduled the bill for a vote anyway because he thought some Democrats might switch sides after labor unions came out in support of the measure. Dozens of construction workers and equipment operators carrying signs that read "Mine Jobs Now!" and "Let Us Work" poured into the Capitol before the vote.

Schultz said the new bill was still full of "squishy" language that weakens environmental standards. He also complained allowing contested case hearings after a permit has been approved and a mine is already under construction would make it too difficult for challengers to prevail. Sen. Bob Jauch, D-Poplar, whose district would include the mine site, echoed him.

"It is, in fact, a proposal to weaken environmental standards," Jauch said, "... and the Department of Natural Resources' ability to protect (people's) homes."

Source URL (retrieved on *07/12/2014 - 1:17am*):
http://www.chem.info/news/2012/03/mining-company-pulling-out-wisconsin?qt-most_popular=1