

House stymies Engler's bid to boost charter cap

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Unable to find the necessary votes among representatives, Gov. John Engler and the House Republican leadership gave up hopes of raising the cap on charter schools by the end of this

year. Despite approval by the Senate last week of House Bill 4959 — a bill already voted out by the House but amended in the Senate to contain verbiage raising the limit on university-authorized "public school academies" from the current 150 to 200 in

the coming year — House leadership didn't even take a vote before adjourning for the year early Thursday morning. A handful of House Republicans could not be convinced of the need to raise the cap. The primary concern of opponents, on both sides of the aisle, was accountability of charter schools to the public and the state legislature.

Locally, two lawmakers were among the holdouts who defeated the bill — Rep. Patricia Godchaux (R-Birmingham) and Rep. Gerald Law (R-Plymouth).

Law explained that charter schools have been allowed to operate like private schools, but get taxpayer money to pay for operations. He wanted provisions added making charter schools as accountable for their spending as public schools are.

Godchaux said the charters draw money away from public schools. That makes it even more difficult for failing school districts to improve their performance. In the meantime, the state is doing little to support

those students left behind in the distressed school districts.

Engler had wanted the limit increased by the end of this year so that new charter schools could open next fall. According to his spokesman, John Truscott, some 140 schools are already in operation in the state and another 100 are ready to seek approval.

With the failure of the bill, new charter schools will have to (a) wait a year, (b) seek authorization through an agency other than a state university, such as a school district or community college, or (c) count on lawmakers passing the bill early next year with enough additional votes to give it immediate effect.

When the House could not move the bill the previous week, Republican Senators took over the initiative. Starting with House Bill 4959 — a non-controversial bill allowing gifts made to school districts to be moved to foundations, already approved by Representatives and awaiting action in the Senate — lawmakers in the upper chamber added the verbiage to raise the cap on charter schools. The amendment

would have raised the limit 50 in the first year, then by 25 more in following years.

On the floor, Sen. Dianne Byrum (D-Onondaga) sought to amend the bill to increase accountability. Her proposal would have required charter schools to release audits to the state, obtain criminal records of employees, require credentials for teachers, provide special education services, adopt conflict of interest policies, comply with state procurement policies and review complaints made by parents.

"This is straightforward. It is reasonable. I'm not against charter schools. These will help them to be successful," she said.

Sen. Mike Rogers (R-Howell) said all those requirements were in the bill already since it required that charters follow existing state laws.

"Let's not be afraid of a little competition," Rogers countered. "We ought not just put up barriers, pulling in the reins on kids who need our help. Public schools cannot be all things to all people," he said.

Sen. Gary Peters (D-Bloomfield) proposed an amendment which would require charter schools to report publicly what they pay to management companies when such firms are contracted to run those schools.

"Disclosure is needed to safeguard public monies," he argued. "Once it is in the hands of the management company, it becomes private."

Rogers disagreed again. "I wish the minority had taken the time to read this bill because it is already in there," he said.

Both amendments failed in 15-22 party line votes.

On final passage, Senators approved the bill 22-15, only to have the bill stall again in the House.

Here's how are lawmakers voted:

Yes: Sens. Bill Bullard (R-Highland); Mat Dunaskie (R-Lake Orion) and Shirley Johnson (R-Royal Oak).

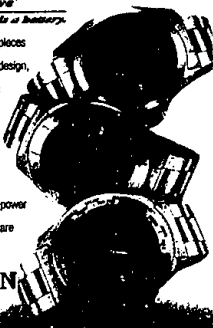
No: Sens. John D. Cherry Jr. (D-Cllo) and Gary Peters (D-Bloomfield).

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