In the final hour, state legislators clean up some work

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It wasn't prom night, but the Michigan Legislature was up until 3 a.m. Dec. 11, cleaning up work that many members said should have been done last June.

These bills made it through both chambers and are being signed by Gov. John Engler:

Assessment cut – Township residents who pay special assessments will get a break under bill sponsored by Sen. Bill Bullard Jr., R-Milford. It requires that such bills be based on the "taxable value" of property, which tends to be lower than the "state equalized value."

Townships and villages use special assessments to pay for specific purposes such as water, sewers, lighting and street paving. Under the 1994 Proposal A package, increases in property valuations were limited to 5 percent or the rate of consumer price inflation. Thus, "taxable value" is capped, but the old "state equalized value" is not.

But Attorney General Frank Kelley ruled that the law applied only to taxes, not special assessments. Bullard's Senate Bill 428 applies taxable value to assessments, too.

The Senate passed it 37-0 on May 28, but the House waited until Dec. 11 to pass it on an 89-1 vote.

Billboard ban – Tobacco ads would be banned from roadside billboards beginning Jan. 1 of 2000, under House Bill 4343. The Senate approved it 28-9 after a sharp debate.

"It is foolish – stupid – idiotic to smoke," said opponent John J.H. Schwarz, R-Battle Creek, "but it's a legal product made by legal companies. I suggest we read the first amendment (to the U.S. Constitution, guaranteeing free speech)." Schwarz and George Hart, D-Dearborn, were the only area senators opposing the bill.

The House passed it 76-10 in September.

The American Cancer Society supported the bill. Opposed were the Michigan Chamber of Commerce and the American Civil Liberties Union.

$5,000 reward – The Senate gave 37-0 approval to a House-passed bill that would require the Department of Natural Resources to offer $5,000 rewards for information leading to the arrest and prosecution of anti-hunters who interfere with lawful hunting and fishing.

The person who was interfered with would be ineligible for the reward. Money would come from the Wildlife Resource Protection Fund. Currently, only poaching is subject to reward money.

State costs would be increased "a minimal amount, depending on the number and type of rewards for reporting harassment," according to the Senate Fiscal Agency. All area senators voted yes except John Cherry, D-Clio, who missed the vote.

Snowmobile safety – The Senate voted to establish civil and criminal penalties for the reckless operation of snowmobiles, whether operated on a highway, trail, frozen lake or parking lot.

Reckless operation would be punishable by a misdemeanor fine of up to $250. A snowmobiler who recklessly caused death or serious injury could be imprisoned for two years and fined up to $2,000.

The House passed the bill earlier.

Official wildflower – Maverick Sen. Dave Jaye, R-Macomb County, was the only member to vote against House Bill 4923 making the dwarf lake iris the official state wildflower. Sponsor was Rep. Liz Brater, D-Ann Arbor.

Michigan has a state flag, seal, coat of arms and eight official symbols: stone (Petoskey), flower (apple blossom), fish (brook trout), reptile (painted turtle), gem (Isle Royale greenstone), soil (Kalkaska), bird (robin) and tree (white pine).

No fees – No elected official in Michigan would be permitted to charge a speaking fee under House Bill 4160 which the Senate passed 37-0.

Currently the ban on fees applies only to the 148 members of the Legislature. The bill by Rep. Sue Rocca, R-Sterling Heights, would apply to more than 15,000 state and local elected officials.

"Accepting speaking fees could be viewed as double compensation," said Rocca, "because public speaking is already part of an elected official's duties."

Her bill is viewed as a campaign reform law because well-heeled interest groups sometimes give an official a major gift by calling it a speaking honorarium.

Court building – The House approved 67-27 Senate Bill 906 to construct a new Hall of Justice for the Supreme Court and Court of Appeals west of the Capitol Building in Lansing.

Many lawmakers balked at the $88 million cost, including $15 for a parking deck and restrooms and restaurants that would be closed to the public.

Here is how area lawmakers voted:

Observer

YES – Lyn Bankes, R-Redford, Eileen DeHart, D-Westland, Gerald Law, R-Plymouth, Andrew Raczkowski, R-Farmington Hills.

NO – Bob Brown, D-Dearborn Heights, Tom Kelly, D-Wayne, Deborah Whyman, R-Canton.

Eccentric

YES – Penny Crissman, R-Rochester Hills, Patricia Godchaux, R-Birmingham, Nancy Quarles, D-Southfield, Shirley Johnson, R-Royal Oak, Tom Middleton, R-Ortonville.

ABSENT – Barbara Dobb, R-Union Lake, Greg Kaza, R-Rochester Hills.

HomeTown

YES – Dan Gustafson, R-Williamston, Nancy Cassis, R-Novi, Gerald Law, R-Plymouth, Kirk Profit, D-Ypsilanti, Tom Middleton, R-Ortonville, Judy Scranton, R-Brighton.

Internet access – The Senate unanimously approved a bill by Rep. Bob Brown, D-Dearborn Heights, to require the Legislature to put House and Senate journals on-line on the Internet.

The law would take effect as soon as the governor signs it, but not soon enough. The Senate Journals for Dec. 10-11 were still unavailable Dec. 14, although the House Journals were posted.

Journals contain a record of all roll call votes on bills and amendments, formal protests to passage of bills, the governor's veto messages and the texts of commemorative resolutions.

Clerks empowered – County clerks would be enabled to solemnize marriages under a House bill that got 30-7 Senate approval. Currently, the only clerk who may solemnize marriages is the clerk of a charter county may solemnize marriages.

House Bill 5613, sponsored by Rep. Liz Brater, D-Ann Arbor, also empowers judges of the state's new family courts to solemnize marriages.

All area senators supported the measure except Mike Rogers, R-Brighton, who voted no, and John Cherry, D-Clio, who was absent.

Lump sum – Lottery winners would have the option of receiving their winnings in a lump sum or in installments under House Bill 5127, passed 35-1 by the Senate.

Sen. William VanRegenmorter, R-Jenison, objected that the bill is unnecessary. "Everything the bill requires is already being done. What problem does this solve?"

Replied Sen. Dave Jaye, R-Macomb County: *It sets the Lottery's practice into state law.*

Jaye had the unusual distinction of voting twice for the bill. He introduced it in the House in 1997 while serving there and voted again as a senator in 1998 after being elected to fill a vacancy.

STATE NEWS

Baldwin Church and Center collecting donations for holidays

Donations should be turned in by Saturday, Dec. 19. Christmas baskets will be distributed Tuesday, Dec. 22.

The Baldwin Church and Center, a non-profit agency based in Pontiac, is collecting non-perishable food items and turkeys to be distributed at Christmas to Pontiac families living at or below the federal poverty level.

Canned food, paper products and funds to purchase fresh produce and turkeys are needed.

Donations should be turned in by Saturday, Dec. 19. Christmas baskets will be distributed Tuesday, Dec. 22. Anyone interested in donating should call (248) 332-6101.

Each family will receive two large boxes of food: one of perishable items (bread, dairy products and fresh vegetables), one of staple items and a turkey. The food provided will serve a needy family of four for one week. All of these food items are donated or purchased with donated funds.

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