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READY TO RUMBLE: LEGISLATURE OPENS THIS WEEK



Pat Christman

Minnesota State University, seeking a \$30 million expansion and renovation of its science building, has a lot riding on the 2006 legislative session. But construction funding statewide is far from the only issue legislative leaders intend to deal with in the session that starts Wednesday.

Big plans



By Mark Flaschenich
Free Press Staff Writer

If Steve Sviggum, the speaker of the House, has his way, the 2006 legislative session will be both short and very productive. Recent history suggests that's unlikely.

Traditionally, the state legislative session starting Wednesday would be short and the agenda would be narrow. The even-numbered year, after all, is the second-year of the state's two-year budget cycle — so the budget is already set and doesn't need to be dealt with again until 2007. And even-numbered years are election years — so lawmakers often have tried to use the second session of the biennium to pass a big borrowing bill to finance popular construction projects across the state, maybe tweak a few budgets and get home to begin their re-election campaigns. But at least one important state leader seems inclined to do much more than usual. "It will be rather short in duration, hopefully, but rather large in agenda," said House Speaker Steve Sviggum during a stop in Mankato earlier this month. Sviggum, the leader of the Republican-controlled House, mentioned first tackling the bonding bill — the standard

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SESSION: Sviggum has an ambitious agenda

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even-year task of deciding which construction projects will be included in the massive borrowing bill.

Sviggum, however, quickly added to the list of agenda items: property-tax relief, protections for property owners from eminent domain, spending restrictions on schools, gay marriage amendments, illegal immigration legislation, performance pay for legislators and the governor, a constitutional amendment dedicating funding to environmental and habitat programs, health-care reform, and a borrowing bill for highways. Oh, and stadiums for the Minnesota Twins and University of Minnesota Gopher football team.

After two straight years in which lawmakers struggled to get the most basic things done during regular legislative sessions like passing a budget (05) and passing a bonding bill (04), it's an ambitious lineup.

Even Republican lawmakers who support much of the agenda wonder how it can get done.

"The speaker wants to get out (of St. Paul) by May 5," said Rep. Tony Cornish, R-Vernon Center. "Everybody's scratching their heads wondering how we can do it."

Sen. John Hottinger, DFL-St. Peter, doesn't think it's possible considering that all legislation must be through committees by late March or early April under deadlines agreed to by Sviggum and the DFL-controlled Senate.

"I don't think it's realistic," Hottinger said. "... I think (Sviggum's) agenda is longer than usual because he's more afraid about the election than usual."

Scandals in the Republican-dominated federal government

and a Minnesota economy that is less vigorous than that of many other states are pushing Republicans to look for wedge issues to distract voters in the November elections, Hottinger said. That's why Sviggum and Gov. Tim Pawlenty are pushing for votes on a marriage amendment to the constitution, on illegal immigration initiatives and on other divisive social issues, he said.

Sviggum said he simply wants lawmakers to take a stand on those issues — pass them or kill them, but take a vote.

Hottinger said the Senate will focus on the work that needs to get done — the bonding bill, a funding source for a court-mandated cleanup of Minnesota rivers and adjusting the budget.

The chief budget adjustment could be replacing \$400 million in revenue from the tobacco tax/fee imposed last summer. Tobacco companies have sued, saying the fee is a breach of a settlement they reached with the state in the 1990s.

While Hottinger is hopeful this week's budget forecast will show enough surplus revenue to cover the potential loss of the \$400 million, Rep. John Dorn said the uncertainty about how the courts will rule is troublesome.

"I don't even know how much we'll know (by the end of the session)," said Dorn, DFL-Mankato.

Sviggum said the issue will force lawmakers to be cautious, but he noted there's \$317 million reserved from a previous projected surplus for tax relief.

The House will pass property-tax relief and eliminating any harm to married taxpayers from the state not conforming completely with changes in federal tax law, Sviggum said. It will be provided directly to taxpayers rather than as aid to

local governments.

"We want it broad-based to affect citizens," he said.

Hottinger cautioned, however, the \$317 million is onetime money, not an ongoing source of revenue for ongoing tax relief.

"Using onetime money to buy down property taxes before an election would not be property-tax relief," he said.

Sviggum supports Pawlenty's plan to borrow \$2.5 billion for road projects around the state, saying low-interest rates make now an ideal time to borrow — especially when highway construction costs are rising at a much higher rate.

"We can do these projects quicker, we can do them more efficiently and we can do them cheaper," Sviggum said. "...

Highway 14 can be finished between Mankato and Owatonna right now."

Hottinger doesn't expect the Senate to go along with the borrowing approach to highway construction. Under the plan, the highway bonds would be repaid with money that ultimately comes from the general fund, leaving less available for schools while leaving debt for

Minnesota's children to repay between Mankato and Owatonna right now."

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Whatever the size of the legislative agenda in 2006, the final item — adjournment — must occur no later than midnight May 22.