

Life vs. legislators: Driving, drinking, gambling

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SPRINGFIELD - If you play video poker, crave more information about government spending or desperately want local roads repaired, then state lawmakers delivered for you during their spring session.

But if you're a motorist with a weakness for texting while driving, a wine lover watching the bottom line or a gay couple hoping for a civil union ceremony, then you've got something to gripe about.

Over the weekend, lawmakers wrapped up their spring legislative session. They spent time deciding - or ducking - important issues that don't necessarily affect everyday life. They debated little resolutions and fine points that don't matter much at all.

But they also made decisions that many Illinoisans will notice on a daily basis.

Now it's up to Gov. Pat Quinn to decide which of these measures becomes law and which get sent back to the Legislature.

He's delaying action on what many legislators consider the biggest accomplishment of the session: A roughly \$29 billion public works program that is supposed to create jobs while modernizing the state's roads, bridges, schools and public transportation systems.

Sen. Mike Jacobs, D-East Moline, said his district would see about \$500 million worth of projects, including a new Western Illinois campus and loads of road projects. His constituents will definitely see the results.

"They'll notice that everybody's working. You know, because these are good jobs too, these aren't small jobs. These are construction jobs," Jacobs said.

Quinn was a leader in passing the long-discussed construction program, but he says he won't sign it until legislators overhaul the partial state budget they approved before leaving town. That budget, which would require slashing billions of dollars in spending, would hurt the state's credit and make it difficult to borrow money for the public works projects, he says.

Quinn argues the state needs a combination of spending cuts and an income tax increase to balance the budget. "We'll get there, I'm confident of that," the Chicago Democrat said.

Illinoisans would feel the impact of a statewide construction plan in ways that go beyond smooth roads.

To help pay for it, lawmakers voted to legalize gambling on video poker machines already found in many taverns - where they are supposed to be played "for amusement only." Across Illinois, bars, truck stops and even some restaurants suddenly would be able to offer gambling to their customers.

Rep. John Fritchey opposes legalizing betting everywhere people turn.

"It is one thing to create casinos as a destination for people who want to gamble. It's another thing to put the gambling in the face of people on every corner around the state," the Chicago Democrat said.

Legislators also raised driving fees to pay for the construction program. The cost of a four-year driver's license, for instance, would climb to \$30 from \$10. License plates would cost \$99 a year instead of \$79.

Drinkers will have to pay more, too.

The tax on a six-pack of beer would go up nearly 3 cents and on a bottle of wine the bump would be 13 cents. A fifth of hard liquor would cost about 80 cents more.

Finding out how government spends that money or makes other important decisions could get easier. Lawmakers approved measures to beef up the state's public information laws.

They created an advocate's position in the attorney general's office called a "public access counselor," who would make binding rulings on disputes over releasing records. They also closed some loopholes, created penalties for violating the law, told officials to turn over records sooner and made it easier for people who sue to get records to recover their legal fees.

Lawmakers also:

- Voted to prohibit people from texting or checking e-mail while driving. Motorists could still read directions on navigation devices and check their e-mail or texts if they pull over or are stopped in traffic.
- Made clear that divorced parents have a right to "virtual visitation" with their children. Lawmakers passed a measure that says court-ordered visitation can include communications like e-mail and instant messaging.
- Put student athletes on notice about performance-enhancing drugs. Lawmakers voted to let the Illinois High School Association randomly test for the substances. The program, which would be reviewed in two years, would test at least 1,000 students from one-quarter of the state's high schools with sports teams.

Legislators delayed decisions on several high-profile issues.

The Senate approved legalizing medical marijuana in Illinois but the measure is stuck in the House. The bill would let sick people use pot to get relief from diseases like cancer, AIDS and multiple sclerosis.

Also stalled in the House is a bill that would create civil unions, giving gay couples the same legal protections and benefits as married couples.

Supporters say they're still a few votes short of what they need to pass it, at least in part because some lawmakers don't want to vote for it so close to next year's election.

"That's most disheartening to me," said Equality Illinois political director Rick Garcia.