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## Mayoral control bill in hands of Senate

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On the front of the former Monroe County Democratic Committee headquarters on East Avenue, a flier seeks to rally people against mayoral control of city schools.

The red, white and blue image of Mayor Robert Duffy emulates the iconic 2008 Obama political signs, but replaces the word “Hope” with “Nope.”

It has been there for nearly four months.

But after a wait that was longer than Duffy and others anticipated, this could be a pivotal week in the debate. With the legislative session winding down, the state Senate appears poised to take action on Rochester-specific legislation. Members of the Assembly already approved the bill on a lopsided 89 to 40 vote Thursday.

The Senate vote, if it occurs, is expected to be much closer. But if the bill doesn't pass before the end of the session, some proponents say they'll be back where they started when Duffy raised the issue six months ago.

At issue is a proposed governance change that would take effect July 1, 2011, and make the school district a city department, dissolve the school board and place the mayor and City Council in charge.

“This thing, right now, has all the appearances of ... being put as the last bill, on the last calendar, on the last day — which I guarantee you will be July 4th at 4 in the morning,” said Sen. George Maziarz, R-Newfane, Niagara County.

On Friday, the bill made a brief appearance on the Senate floor before being pulled back as budget talks had taken a key Democratic leader out of town. The senate's Democratic leadership will not bring the bill up for a vote unless they have the votes to pass it, officials said. Thus, it is possible the legislation could be held over to the next session or possibly a special budget session, which are regularly called in the fall. That, advocates said, is undesirable.

“Right now, there is some significant momentum,” said Lois Giess, former City Council president and a member of the Rochester Kids First Coalition, which supports mayoral control. If the legislation stalls, “we would have to really re-create the momentum. It would require almost making the case again.”

On Friday, Giess and other coalition members called a news conference with Duffy to urge passage of the bill. Coalition member Kate Bennett decried the district’s 46 percent four-year graduation rate and seeing her daughter’s 2012 graduating class grow smaller every year.

“The culture of schools needs to change from telling us what the problems are to solving the problems one by one,” said Bennett, president of the Rochester Museum & Science Center. “We all need to change to make this work.”

Some advocates say this is a now-or-never opportunity for reform, with taxpayer frustration over Albany dysfunction at an all-time high, a community engaged in the education discussion, reform-minded politicians in power and powerful unions and lobbyists, arguably, back on their heels. Others view this as a possible watershed moment for education in New York state.

“If this goes, I guarantee you — guarantee you — the next day the mayor of the city of Buffalo, I suspect, (asks for legislation),” Maziarz said. “I would have to believe that Syracuse, Yonkers and even Albany might not be very far behind.”

A spokesman for Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown declined comment Friday. Syracuse Mayor Stephanie Miner has said she is considering seeking mayoral control, but has not yet thrown her support behind it there.

Duffy plans to travel to Albany this week and lobby senators for the bill. Assemblyman David Gantt, D-Rochester, who co-authored the legislation, said he will continue working for its passage until the Senate vote, which he hopes will happen in the next few days.

“I don’t believe in coming back next week,” Gantt said. “I believe in trying to win now.”

Gantt and others, including the Rochester Kids First Coalition, insist the delay does not hurt the bill’s chances but does postpone improving the school system. The extra time only would be an opportunity to keep building coalitions and keep educating legislators and the community.

But Dan DiClemente, president of the union representing non-teaching employees in the school district, took the opposite perspective.

“The longer this goes on, the more credibility the proponents for mayoral control lose,” DiClemente said. “They keep saying they were going to have (an operations plan) this week, they were going to have it last week, they were going to have public hearings that never happened.”

Duffy said he saw an incomplete draft operations plan last week and would not commit to having one finished before legislation is approved.

And with Duffy running for lieutenant governor, delaying the vote could mean senators are asked to consider the bill at the same time Rochester is searching for a new mayor.

“I don’t know how you can think about imposing mayoral control on a city that has no mayor,” DiClemente said.

Whatever the outcome this week, the debate is certain to go on. Duffy said that if the legislation is adopted, the community has the next year to develop, revise and refine an operations plan. And if implemented, there will be ongoing debate over its performance, which supporters say will take time to show results.

And if nothing happens, “we will continue to keep beating the drums,” said coalition member Sandy Parker, president and CEO of the Rochester Business Alliance. “We’ll continue to build the coalition, and quite frankly, it has the potential to become a big issue in November.”

That’s just about four months from now.

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