

Edwards' vetoes are politics as usual

Jeff Sadow

Let's just say Gov. John Bel Edwards' veto messages don't exactly bring to mind Billy Joel's song "Honesty."

Wrapping up the constitutional veto period, Edwards mainly shot down bills authored by legislators who annoy him. Of the bills stricken, all but one originated from a political opponent. That exception, renaming a school building, became moot when the district in question did so after the law's passage.

As for the remainder, by Republican state representatives save one, Democrat Edwards axed bills by Tony Bacala and Rick Edmonds, who through repeated efforts to strip vacant positions have tried to reduce the size of state government that Edwards wants to grow. The governor also vetoed a bill by Nancy Landry, who, as leader of the House Education Committee, has helped to thwart his attempts to roll back education reform. And he vetoed a bill by Lance Harris, who, as chairman of the Republican delegation, has rallied the majority party to defeat Edwards' tax-raising agenda that would increase overall spending.

Add to the enemies list Democratic state Rep. Neil Abramson, who interfered with Edwards' plot to install one of their own partisans as House Speaker and generally has aligned himself with the GOP on fiscal issues. Edwards spiked his bill that would have increased reporting requirements aimed at reassuring the public that needed roads projects progressed.

Like previous governors, who often tried to disguise naked vindictiveness as a reasoned policy choice, Edwards sought to present plausible rationales for his actions in his veto messages. And, as in their cases, sometimes you can buy the explanations, and sometimes they strain credulity.

Abramson's House Bill 598 would have, in addition to other things, allowed lawmakers to substitute projects onto the master list determined by scoring from the Department of Transportation and Development. Now, they only can drop items. Edwards accurately noted that this could inject too much politics into the process.

On other matters, Edwards' reasoning appears forced. Edmonds' House Bill 132 which would have required the Division of Administration, until the year 2020, to report to the Joint Legislative Committee on

the Budget any budgetary shifts of \$50,000 and list all adjustments monthly. The governor criticized the "overly burdensome" nature of a law that would affect "small and routine transactions." In reality, major changes don't happen often, DOA tracks all transfers, and it would take little effort to compile such a list. As a legislator, Edwards didn't seem to mind even more intrusive budgetary controls on the executive. He joined in the nearunanimous approval of Act 87 of 2015, which for two years gave the JLBC power to approve many contracts worth at least \$40,000.

Concerning Harris' House Bill 269, which would have asked state public universities to spell out procedures to safeguard the exercise of campus free speech, Edwards' justification insults citizens' intelligence. He again claimed the process as "overly burdensome," even though the bill only would necessitate that higher education officials coordinate existing policies and perhaps streamline them. Edwards said there are already adequate guarantees of free expression, despite recent well-publicized incidents across the country where universities allowed its trampling.

However, Edwards' killing of the bill crosses from spite to hypocrisy. He signed off on Senate Bill 106 by reliable partisan supporter state Sen. Wesley Bishop, which instructs higher education officials to teach incoming adult freshmen about the birds and the bees to prevent unplanned pregnancies. This will waste far more resources on something outside of colleges' genuine academic purpose than taking steps to secure free speech, a bedrock principle of academia.

Edwards' desire to punish opponents makes him no different from past governors. Nor does his attempts to hide his true motives that in his veto language. But, notably, no other governor made acting honestly in all things, including policy-making, such a major campaign issue.