

Edwards struggles to win with GOP-led Legislature

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BATON ROUGE — Five weeks into Louisiana's regular session, proposals sought by Gov. John Bel Edwards are again having a rough ride in the majority-Republican House and Senate, with some already shelved and budget battles still looming.

The Democratic governor has seen education measures stalled at their first stop, equal pay and minimum wage bills that were central to his campaign rejected and bills aimed at combatting sexual harassment bottled up.

That's not to say his legislative agenda is entirely in tatters. Other measures Edwards is seeking still are moving through the House and Senate.

But many of his more controversial proposals have failed to gain traction, showing how a Louisiana governor's traditional power to muscle through sweeping change has been stymied with lawmakers.

Fights over the biggest outstanding legislative issue - how to craft a state budget with \$648 million less in general state tax dollars - are really just beginning.

House GOP leaders unveil their spending proposal Monday, and it's expected to be at odds with the approach favored by the governor, who wants to call another special session to pass taxes to replace some expiring temporary taxes that are creating the budget gap.

Edwards' difficulties with the Legislature, particularly with the more conservative House, began even before he took office in 2016, as he tried to follow his predecessors' lead in having a heavy hand in choosing legislative leadership.

This governor, however, failed to solidify support for a New Orleans Democrat, Rep. Walt Leger, to become House speaker in the majority-GOP chamber. Instead, the House bucked Edwards' favored candidate and selected Taylor Barras, the New Iberia Republican who now occupies the speaker's chair.

That has locked Edwards out of decision-making on who would lead key committees and who would make up their members, and the speaker's race started off the term between the governor and House Republicans on an acrimonious note that continues today.

The conflict between Edwards and House GOP leaders has stymied many of the governor's efforts to rewrite Louisiana's tax laws and thwarted attempts from both sides to make permanent, long-term financial decisions for the state.

Even though Edwards has a more solid relationship with Senate leaders, he's still struggled with bills in that chamber as well.

Last month, senators refused Edwards-backed proposals to raise Louisiana's minimum wage to \$8.50 an hour and to enact new laws aimed at lessening the pay gap between men and women. The House labor committee killed similar measures, which are opposed by business groups who hold significant sway in the Legislature.

It was the third year Edwards has seen minimum wage and equal pay measures - issues he ran to change in 2015 - fail to win support. The governor pledged to return with both proposals again.

He'll also likely be back next year with legislation seeking to reverse some changes made by former Gov. Bobby Jindal to public school laws, after those measures again were shelved this session.

Edwards ran with the backing of teacher unions, and he's championed several of their education proposals with no success. This session, bills to lessen the use of student test scores in teacher evaluations and to make it easier to reach the job protection known as tenure never made it past their first stop in the House Education Committee.

Meanwhile, several measures the governor sought to toughen state policies against sexual harassment - proposed after one of his top aides resigned amid harassment allegations - have run into trouble as well.

The House jettisoned a measure that would have banned employers from requiring their workers to sign contracts that keep them from filing sexual harassment lawsuits in civil court. Most Republicans in the chamber opposed the bill.

Other anti-sexual misconduct legislation has gotten bogged down in concerns that Edwards and others have proposed public records exemptions that are too broad and would damage access to information about inappropriate conduct from taxpayer-financed employees.

The Edwards administration says it's trying to offer confidentiality to victims so they feel comfortable to report. Closed-door

negotiations are ongoing to try to find a compromise as the session
nears its midpoint.