

GOP lawmakers upset over Bullock vetoes

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HELENA — Republicans legislators on Tuesday criticized the number of vetoes by Democratic Gov. Steve Bullock and some specific ones.

Before the session started, both Bullock and Republican leaders had expressed a desire to work together for Montana's future.

Some GOP legislators wondered about their future dealings relationship with Bullock.

"I wasn't very happy," said Senate Taxation Chairman Bruce Tutvedt, R-Kalispell. "I had high expectations that Gov. Bullock would act like (former Govs.) Marc Racicot or Ted Schwinden, but he chose a more aggressive stance, more like (Gov.) Brian Schweitzer, than I was hoping for."

Bullock in his first session issued 71 outright vetoes. That's a second only to Schweitzer, who vetoed 78 bills in 2011 for the most of any Montana governor in at least 40 years.

On Monday, Bullock did sign Tutvedt's bill to lower the property tax on business equipment, but vetoed his bill to exempt from property taxes air and water pollution control equipment installed after Dec. 31, 2012.

"I was aware it had a risk (of veto)," Tutvedt said. "I had business executives and a lot of people made phone calls. We thought it had a chance."

Tutvedt said he wasn't surprised that Bullock vetoed his income tax simplification bill, saying, "Maybe the bill wasn't ready for prime time."

Bullock, at a later press conference, defended his vetoes and added, "I don't think it changes the tone I tried to set and the ability to cooperate."

Bullock said he made it clear in his proposed budget, his State of the State speech and throughout the session he wanted a projected mid-2015 budget surplus of \$300 million, with the state not spending more than it's taking in.

Bullock said he issued a substantial number of vetoes for a couple of reasons.

The Legislature delivered 200 bills to him after it adjourned, not allowing time to negotiate with lawmakers through amendatory vetoes.

What's more, he said, the budget left by the Legislature was \$120 million short of his goal to have a projected surplus of \$300 million, and the budget spent more than it took in.

“I took and take the responsibility that we have a balanced budget very seriously,” he said.

Bullock said the veto decisions were difficult, but he used them to cut the budget by \$150 million to reach the \$300 million.

Senate Majority Leader Art Wittich, R-Bozeman, was disappointed Bullock vetoed his bill calling for a one-time, 5 percent, \$47 million cut in income taxes.

“It’s sad,” Wittich said. “With a \$450 million (beginning) surplus, there should have been some general tax relief.”

“He (Bullock) was really pretty silent throughout the session,” Wittich added. “He stayed on the second floor. A lot of his veto messages include points that were never brought up in the hearings. Many were surprises. That’s a waste of all of our time.”

House Speaker Mark Blasdel, R-Somers, said the vetoes showed where Bullock’s priorities are: “That’s state government and state employees, and not with the everyday citizens and taxpayers of the state.”

Senate President Jeff Essmann, R-Billings, said unlike the majority of the Legislature, he agreed with Bullock about the need for a larger surplus because of economic uncertainties.

“I wish the governor had taken a sharper pencil to government spending,” Essmann said. “My view of his actions is the government got what it wanted, the governor got what he wanted, but Montana taxpayers got left holding the bag.”

In past sessions, many bills get delivered to the governor after the Legislature adjourns, Essmann said.

“We gave him some early, and he put amendatory vetoes on them and screwed them up,” Essmann said. “He did not negotiate with most of his amendatory vetoes, so why go through that meaningless exercise?”

Essmann said he was surprised that Bullock vetoed many bills sponsored by the so-called “crossover coalition,” the Republicans who sided with Democrats on many key issues and against their own leadership.

“These guys gave him a pension bailout in the form he wanted, not one that protected Montana taxpayers in the long run,” Essmann said. “They increased spending in the government agencies by double digits. For a lot of tax cut bills, they either did not make it out of committee or died on the floor.

“They apparently did not buy much good will with the governor, not for all the water they carried for him.”

In response, Tutvedt, who was part that group, disagreed with Essmann.

“There never was a deal,” Tutvedt said. “We just did the right thing for the right reasons.”