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Bill To Save Farmland Passes

Prolonged Debate Delays Finance Reform Vote

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June 8 2005

House Republicans debated a farmland preservation bill for six hours Tuesday, delaying action on campaign finance reform and other matters on the next-to-last day of the session.

"The vote finally comes," state Rep. Andrew Fleischmann said as he voted at 4:57 p.m. for a bill called at 11 a.m. "How many hours was it?"

The bill, approved 109-39, would tack a \$30 charge onto land transactions recorded by municipal town clerks. The \$27 million raised by this new fee would be used to preserve farmland from development, set aside open space, build affordable housing, and preserve historic buildings and landmarks.

The Senate passed the bill by a 34-0 vote. It is not clear if Gov. M. Jodi Rell will sign it into law, but the House and Senate tallies would be enough to override a veto, said a chief proponent, Rep. Lew Wallace, D-Danbury.

During the debate, Terry Jones of Shelton, a farmer and chairman of the Working Lands Alliance backing the bill, offered his own terse commentary on the discussion in an aside to House Speaker James Amann.

"Mr. Speaker, should I go back to Shelton and get the manure spreader?" Jones asked, when the debate entered its fourth hour. "This has been an education to me."

"I don't know if they have legitimate concerns or if their game plan is to kill the clock," Amann, D-Milford, said during the lengthy debate.

Rep. William Hamzy, R-Plymouth, said later that Republicans talked because they believed the bill levies an undeclared tax on property buyers and is an end-run around the state spending law.

"We didn't plan a long discussion. But this bill will breach the constitutional spending cap by \$17 million in the second year of our two-year budget," Hamzy said. "That's wrong."

One of the farm bill's sponsors was Senate President Pro Tem Donald E. Williams Jr., whose bill to restrict junk food in schools sparked an eight-hour debate earlier this session.

"I told Don he owes me a lot of comp time on this and the school nutrition bill," Amann quipped.

After the House vote, Williams said the bill is important "because we have about 360,000 acres of farmland in Connecticut but we are losing this land to development at a faster rate than any other state."

Throughout the evening, Democrats said they still believe that Republicans had used the farmland issue to take up time and doom bills they don't like.

They also were upset that Republican leaders declined to suspend the House rules so the group could discuss medical malpractice insurance reforms passed late Monday by the Senate.

"We need to do at least 10 bills to implement the budget. There's at least 50 more bills that legislators are really interested in seeing passed. We have a lot of work to do in a short time," Kirkley-Bey said.

It guarantees a hectic last day of the 2005 session, which ends at midnight today.