Despite no veto override of Medicaid freeze, Kasich slams lawmakers

By Jim Siegel
The Columbus Dispatch

Medicaid expansion enrollment in Ohio will not be frozen, but the Ohio House did vote Thursday to override a handful of Gov. John Kasich’s Medicaid-related budget vetoes, giving lawmakers more authority over spending for the huge health insurance program.

To that, Kasich sent his fellow Republicans a message: “If you break it, you own it. I call upon senators to carefully consider the consequences of their decisions and keep Ohio on the right path.”

House Speaker Cliff Rosenberger, R-Clarksville, said he had the 60 votes to override the expansion freeze, but after talking to Kasich multiple times and getting assurance the governor would work with him on other vetoed items, the House decided not to go forward.

That “does not mean we will not come back in the fall and take that back up,” he said. “We want to give the summer to let the federal government see if they are going to come to a conclusion in Congress before we take action on moving forward with the freeze waiver.”

The House also overrode a Kasich veto of provision that likely will pave the way to fracking in state parks and other public lands.

Aryeh Alex, director of the Ohio Environmental Council Action Fund, said, “This unconscionable attempt to override this veto puts the business interests of oil and gas companies ahead of the well-being of all Ohioans. With one vote, our
legislative leaders have diminished the quality of public lands that we all own, in
exchange for a one-time check.”

Majority lawmakers added the Medicaid freeze to the new two-year budget, but
Kasich vetoed the measure and dozens of other provisions before signing it last
week. The House returned to session Thursday and voted to override 11 vetoes.

Join the conversation at Facebook.com/dispatchpolitics and connect
with us on Twitter @OhioPoliticsNow

Senate President Larry Obhof, R-Medina, said his members likely would support
other overrides, should the House act on them later in the session.

“I played an active role in (the Medicaid) freeze and some of the limitations on
the Controlling Board,” he said. “We also have some provisions related to the
legislative review of state agencies, which were not on the floor today but I think
is something our caucus remains interested in.”

The Senate could return next week or later in the summer to take up override
votes.

Under the freeze, no new Medicaid expansion enrollees would have been
permitted after July 1, 2018. And if those on Medicaid at that time temporarily
got a higher paying job and no longer qualified would not be allowed to return
to the expansion rolls later unless the person is getting mental health or drug
addiction treatment.

Kasich has touted the importance of Medicaid expansion in the state’s efforts to
battle an opioid crisis that last year killed more than 4,000 Ohioans.

In the explanation of his veto, Kasich argued the freeze violated federal law
because it would deny coverage to members of an otherwise eligible group. He
said the expansion has improved access to care and decreased more costly
emergency room use, and the freeze would halt those improvements “to the
detriment of the state’s economy in general and needy Ohioans in particular.”

Kasich on Thursday said he applauded lawmakers who “held off a misguided
push to strip health care from hundreds of thousands of Ohioans – for now.”
But Kasich still didn’t like the veto overrides that were approved. “A number of the actions taken by the House today threaten health care access for vulnerable Ohioans including seniors, people with disabilities, veterans and children, as well as Ohio’s hard-won budget stability. When these actions begin to impact health care access for Ohioans, those who supported them will bear responsibility.”

Both supporters and opponents of the freeze worked hard to push lawmakers, including a Statehouse rally Wednesday and statewide phone banks.

The Ohio Medicaid Coalition’s co-leader, Nikki Reiss, said she is grateful health care is being preserved for 500,000 Ohioans, at least for now.

“The data and individual stories show time and again that this coverage is crucial for hard working Ohioans to seek preventative and comprehensive care. While we are disappointed that the House saw fit to override the governor’s veto of the outdated Healthy Ohio plan and Controlling Board provision related to (Medicaid) expansion, we are encouraged that they chose not to take up the veto of the expansion freeze. By giving individuals the tools to seek care early and preventing conditions from worsening, expansion improves the quality of life and keeps costs low for all Ohioans.”

Rep. Mike Duffey, R-Worthington, said he was among those who opposed overriding the freeze veto. “I led opposition to focus on subgroup rather than overall spending. Congress should give more options,” he tweeted.

While there is no freeze, GOP lawmakers did vote for the first time to override Kasich vetoes, including one requiring the Kasich administration to come before the state Controlling Board, a legislative spending oversight panel, to get approval to spend the state share of money for the Medicaid expansion. The expansion is currently 95 percent funded by the federal government, and that share is scheduled to slowly reduce over time.

“This is not about winning or losing today. It’s about exercising checks and balances and giving control to the people,” said Rep. Ryan Smith, R-Bidwell, chairman of the House Finance Committee.

The House overrode a veto related to limiting Controlling Board authority. By doing so, the board would not be permitted to approve new influxes of money that exceed roughly $165 million.
The House also upheld provisions that will increase payments to nursing homes and would limit the administration’s ability to cover new, optional groups under Medicaid.

The House upheld a provision that allows people to build up a health savings account and allows the state to charge a maximum $8 a month for Medicaid premiums.

Rosenberger said the House moved forward on veto overrides that give the legislature more control of Medicaid cost, eligibility and rates. He said he hopes to see the federal government give the state more controls and more efficiency in the system.

Democrats voted against some of the Medicaid-related overrides.

“We have to figure out how to get people into steady health care to manage their situations and health outcomes, and save money,” said House Minority Leader Fred Strahorn, D-Dayton. “Some of the stuff they did against our wishes, I think, will curtail that.”

The House also upheld its vetoed proposal that allows a new insurance franchise fee that will provide more than $200 million per year for counties and transit authorities for six years to make up for the loss of Medicaid managed care sales tax funding.

The House is trying to help counties through a period of tough times, said Rep. Bill Seitz, R-Cincinnati.

Major Ohio business associations had opposed the override.

The House also took action that could speed up the process to issue permits for drilling on state lands.

For more than five years, Kasich has refused to appoint members to the Ohio Oil and Gas Leasing Commission, which has the responsibility of approving potential drillers after completion of environmental and geological studies, determining the potential impact on visitors and seeking public input. If the Senate agrees with the House override, legislative leaders would take over appointments to the commission.
Rosenberger said he hopes to work with Kasich on other items that were vetoed, including those dealing with teacher residency and replacement of voting machines.

Marc Kovac of Gatehouse Media Ohio contributed to this story.

jsiegel@dispatch.com

@phrontpage

READ NEXT

How the new ‘Spider-Man’ is really a John Hughes movie
Posted at 4:15 PM

Grandparent scams aren’t new, but people...
Posted at 3:30 PM

Don’t expect health coverage if you survive a...
Posted at 3:30 PM

‘Hawaii Five-O’ cast departures highlight racial...
Posted at 1:00 PM