

Democrats opting to move Bills without public hearings

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Legislative Democrats this session have been touting rules reforms to boost transparency but they've also shown an early aversion to holding public hearings on key bills before passing them.

The omnibus carbon emissions and energy bill (S 9) whisked to Gov. Charlie Baker's desk on Jan. 28 passed without a hearing that could have given people and interest groups an opportunity to offer public feedback on Baker's significant objections to the climate bill, or enabled the 19 new members of the Legislature to have a say publicly on a bill that died at the end of last session after it was sprung at the eleventh hour out of a private conference committee.

Boston's bill (H 67) to erase the possibility of a special mayoral election depending on the timing of Mayor Martin Walsh's resignation was debated at City Hall so apparently there was no need for a state-level virtual hearing on it. The branches passed it on voice votes and Baker signed it.

This week, the House rubber-stamped an extension of vote-by-mail options (H 73) until June 30. That bill also passed without the benefit of a public hearing that might have shed light on opinions about the historic voting reform. And critical legislation addressing imminent, skyrocketing unemployment insurance rates has generated significant debate in the legislative back-channels but lawmakers still haven't teed up Baker's bill (H 55) for a hearing and public feedback despite its time-sensitive nature. Baker filed his bill Jan. 13.

As the two-month anniversary of the new session approaches, lawmakers do appear to be getting into hearing mode. The Transportation Committee has scheduled a March 9 public hearing on Baker's annual \$200 million local road and bridge funding bill (H 57). And the Joint Ways and Means Committee plans a March 16 virtual public hearing on the education and local aid aspects of Baker's \$45.6 billion budget bill, after an initial hearing this week that featured testimony from Baker's budget chief Michael Heffernan and constitutional officers.

Access to public testimony and a model for reporting committee votes on bills are among the issues needing resolution as House Speaker Ron Mariano and Senate President Karen Spilka look to agree on permanent joint rules to govern branch activities for the 2021-2022 session.