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Abortion bills could come back to the fore in Texas

Created: April 21, 2009 06:51 PM
 Modified: April 21, 2009 06:51 PM

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) -- After months with little or no action, Texas lawmakers are stirring up the emotional cauldron that always brews with abortion-related bills.

A House committee was hearing testimony on a bill that would require women seeking abortions to first have an ultrasound and be shown the results. A Senate panel on Tuesday approved creating new "Choose Life" license plates.

With less than two months left in a session dominated by fights over voter identification bills, insurance and federal stimulus money, supporters of the major abortion-related bills are hoping they can whip their issue back to the forefront.

"There's time," said Joe Pojman, executive director of Texas Alliance for Life. "It's kind like an aircraft: Either you have altitude or you have speed. We have less altitude but I think we're getting speed before you crash ... It's going to be crunch time soon."

Kyleen Wright, president of the Texans for Life Coalition, called the ultrasound bill the "top priority" for anti-abortion groups.

Opponents of the bills are counting on time running out and a lack of will from lawmakers to pin their ears back for an all-out fight like the one that erupted in the Senate over a voter identification bill. The ultrasound bill has stalled in the Senate.

The bill by Sen. Dan Patrick, a Houston Republican and conservative radio talk show host, requires women seeking an abortion to have the ultrasound but gives them the option whether to view the images. It passed the Senate Health and Human Services committee but is stuck waiting for a full Senate vote that may never come.

Patrick passed the bill in the Senate two years ago. But Republicans lost a seat in the 2008 elections and while the GOP still holds a 19-12 majority, Senate rules require 21 votes to bring a bill to the floor for a vote.

That gives Democrats just enough votes to block bills they don't want. Patrick says he's one vote shy of a vote by the full Senate.

"Last session, I passed this bill before the opposition had a chance to mobilize," Patrick said. "(This year) the opposition has been mobilized against this bill since Day One. I'm not giving up."

The ultrasound and "Choose Life" bills had some early momentum.

Republican Gov. Rick Perry endorsed the license plate bill in December. In February, Perry and Republican Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst joined hundreds at a rally on the Capitol steps in support of the ultrasound bill.

In the House, the ultrasound bill has 59 of the 150 House members signed on in support. It was in the lineup in the House State Affairs Committee on Tuesday.

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