

Republican Leaders Take Issue with Plan to Begin Delaware's State Legislative Session

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Senate Minority Leader Gerald Hocker (R-Ocean View) and House Minority Leader Danny Short (R-Seaford) say a plan released late yesterday by the General Assembly's Democratic leaders will blunt the ability of citizens to make their voices heard on controversial bills.

Speaker of the House-Elect Pete Schwartzkopf and Senate President Pro Tem-Elect Dave Sokola, D-Newark, issued a press release late Thursday calling for the 151st General Assembly to start the scheduled legislative session on January 12 in a virtual setting.

Rep. Short and Sen. Hocker agree with initially holding legislative proceedings virtually. However, they both oppose considering any controversial legislation while citizens cannot meet with legislators, testify at committee hearings, or attend floor proceedings in-person.

In the Democratic press release, which was falsely characterized as being bipartisan, Sen. Sokola stated:

“Starting the 151st General Assembly in a virtual format will not stop us from aggressively tackling the economic, public health, and racial justice issues the people of this state are facing on a daily basis. This pandemic has laid bare long-standing fractures in our society and we will not let the fact that we're unable to meet in person prevent us from making progress for Delawareans who can't afford to wait any longer.”

Rep. Schwartzkopf stated:

“When January 12 gets here, we intend to get to work considering bills, holding committee hearings, voting on legislation and doing all the things that the General Assembly is expected to do, just in a different format.

“One silver lining to all of this is that the public will have more access than ever before to the business of the Legislature. Throughout the entire history of the Delaware General Assembly, if you wanted to deliver a public comment during a committee meeting, you had to be in that room in Legislative Hall. If you wanted to watch a roll-call vote, you had to be in the House or Senate chamber. But now, every committee meeting we

hold, every floor debate we have, and every vote we take will be streamed live online."

"It is absurd to eliminate personal contact with citizens and then claim you are doing them a favor by providing the feeble substitute of online access," Sen. Hocker said. "A Zoom session or any other virtual meeting is an inadequate replacement for face-to-face interaction. Online meetings are easy to control and manipulate. They lack the emotion, energy, and intensity that is tangible when dozens or hundreds of people come to Legislative Hall to advocate for a subject about which they are passionate."

Both Rep. Short and Sen. Hocker said the legislature should limit its work in early 2021 to essential bills and measures on which there is little disagreement. They say a large portion of the bills the General Assembly handles are minor, uncontentious, and tend to clear the legislature with broad agreement.

"There were a lot of non-controversial bills we were not able to move last year, and several new measures, like an annual tweak to the Bond Bill, that should be worked," Rep. Short said. "It's these bills we should be considering in January, and perhaps March, if we're still meeting virtually then."

"Sen. Sokola's comments -- which I did not see until after he issued his press release -- leaves little doubt he intends to start immediately considering potentially divisive bills," Rep. Short continued. "Claiming these bills are so important and urgent that they cannot possibly be delayed until early spring is disingenuous. It is an apparent attempt to diminish any dissent by keeping it online and at a distance -- minimizing the rhetorical weight of those objecting to these likely contentious policies. This is a needlessly provocative way for him to begin his tenure as the leader of the Senate."

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