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Legislative session winds down

Lawmakers enter final week of debate

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JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. — Lawmakers, like writers, probably wouldn't get anything done without deadlines. It should mean plenty of work over the next five days.

The Missouri Legislature enters its home stretch this week with several important bills still on the table. Some are on the verge of passage, while others still have significant hurdles.

Still, as state Sen. Charlie Shields, R-St. Joseph, said Friday, "A week is a long time in this business."

One bill still in play would impose a 10 percent mandate for ethanol in most Missouri gasoline. It's cleared the House and Senate, which must now work out their differences. But that's not going to be easy — a meeting of the conference committee Thursday night ended in a shouting match.

Backers of the bill are at loggerheads over a Senate amendment to the bill that would penalize renewable fuel plants that hire illegal immigrants. Some members want to toughen the penalty; others think it would kill the bill.

The ethanol bill has major implications for Northwest Missouri. So does a bill that would raise the state's debt limit by \$120 million, allowing a new women's prison to be built in Chillicothe, Mo.

A capital improvements bill went to the governor last week, authorizing the state to issue general revenue bonds to pay for the project. But the debt ceiling must be raised to issue those bonds. The bill that contains the new, \$775 million debt ceiling has already passed the Senate. Now the House needs to give its blessing.

Meanwhile, the contentious bill to require voters to show a picture identification has cleared the House, but with significant differences from the version approved by the Senate. Perhaps most significantly, the House version exempts a host of people from having to comply with the law by the November elections. Whether those provisions will fly with the Senate remains to be seen.

One last major push will be on "Jessica's Law," a series of tougher penalties for sexual offenders. As for so many pieces of legislation, it needs the Senate and House to come together and craft a compromise.