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Dan Walters: Governor sits on bills, seeks a water deal

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When the Legislature adjourned on Sept. 12 after pulling one of its tiresome - figuratively and literally - all-nighters, it had passed more than 700 bills and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger supposedly had a month, as the state constitution dictates, to sign or veto them.

But the Legislature delayed sending most of the bills to Schwarzenegger until late in the month and now, with less than a week remaining before the Oct. 11 deadline, virtually nothing has emerged from the governor.

Why? The Legislature stalled on sending the bills to Schwarzenegger, fearing he'd make good on veiled threats to hold them hostage, and it's now evident he's doing exactly that, seeking political leverage to push lawmakers toward resolving some leftover issues, particularly a complex package of water bills.

Nobody will say that, of course, but neither is it a secret in the Capitol that Schwarzenegger wants the Legislature to return to Sacramento to deal not only with water but some education reform measures and perhaps an overhaul of the state's much-distorted tax system.

Water, however, is the biggie, as Schwarzenegger attempts to succeed where his predecessors dating back to Ronald Reagan have failed - settling the decades-long war over water policy among powerful stakeholder groups.

A water deal appeared to be close in the final hours of the session, but many legislators and lobbyists balked at doing something so complicated and momentous so quickly, and strong residual opposition to many provisions remained.

The aim is to protect the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, from which most of the state's agricultural and municipal water is drawn and whose environment has been degraded, and to enhance supply reliability. The debate centers on building reservoirs and an "alternative conveyance" around or through the Delta, and on setting tougher quality and conservation goals.

Whether holding bills as hostages would positively affect a water deal is very uncertain. While such horse-trading may influence lesser matters, it's difficult to see someone voting on a high-profile issue such as water merely to get a bill signed.

That problematic nature is compounded by the fact that there's nothing of cosmic importance sitting on the governor's desk. While there are some measures of note, such as bills to expand California's commitment to solar, wind and other alternative energy forms, almost none of them needs to be enacted this year. The alternative energy measures wouldn't take effect for years, for instance.

Given the ideological tilt of the Legislature, it's no surprise that most of the measures now pending are either minor in nature or are important mostly to liberal groups. And that means Republicans and business interests would not be dismayed should Schwarzenegger veto every one of the measures now pending, such as those expanding the services that health insurers must offer.

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