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Gov. Owens wields a busy, fair veto pen

At 40 vetoes and still counting, the governor has weighed legislation fairly and signed 90 percent of the bills that emerged from the statehouse.

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He's a baseball guy who appreciates the benefits of having the last turn at bat.

There's no question Gov. Bill Owens has wielded his veto pen with obvious enjoyment these last few weeks. As of Friday, he had nixed more than 40 pieces of legislation - a personal record and far more than Gov. Roy Romer's high water mark of 27.

Still, Owens has managed to sign about 90 percent of the bills sent to him by the Democrat-controlled legislature. For a governor in a position to undo the work of the majority party, Owens has shown remarkable restraint. While in session, the Democrats showed the same - brushing aside more controversial measures in favor of moderate legislation that has largely earned the governor's approval.

In the process, Owens has strengthened laws related to sex offenders, identity thieves and teen drivers. While he vetoed a bill banning job discrimination against gays and lesbians, he reluctantly approved an omnibus crime bill that included language making it a "hate" crime to target people because of their sexual orientation. Owens allowed it to become law without his signature, and said, "It is regrettable that such transparent political leverage is being used on important issues that deserve to be evaluated on their own merit."

He also signed a law that opened some records on spending for homeland security, and supported measures geared to helping people in the military get unemployment and education benefits.

Critics proved wrong

House Speaker Andrew Romanoff, D-Denver, said that despite Owens' vetoes up to now, critics who thought Owens and the Democrats couldn't get along were proved wrong. "There is a misperception that we are at loggerheads," Romanoff said. Romanoff cited Owens' support for a major economic recovery package. The highest passage rate for bills coming out of the House had both Democrat and Republican sponsorship. The highest veto rate, not surprisingly, appeared to be bills with all or mostly Democratic sponsorship.

Among Owens' decisions, we were particularly disappointed with his veto of measures aimed at lowering pharmaceutical drug costs for consumers. The governor dismissed one measure as an entitlement program for two-thirds of Colorado's households that would threaten private-sector coverage and place the state in the pharmacy business. Owens overlooked the fact that the measures would save the state and consumers millions of dollars.

Sen. Bob Hagedorn, D-Aurora, chairman of the Senate's health committee, said Owens missed a good opportunity to lower prescription drug costs in Colorado. "We could have saved millions at

a time when President Bush is seeking to cut Medicaid programs," Hagedorn said. Affordable health care is a top priority for Coloradans, and next session we hope the governor will work with the legislature to fashion legislation to lower health-care costs.

Owens also vetoed - as unnecessary - a bill that would have limited cash gifts to elected officials. Allowing unregulated cash gifts from lobbyists is wrong, and we urge lawmakers to try again next year.

Democrats kept their word

Democrats, who were in the majority this year for the first time in more than 40 years, deserve applause for holding the reins on reckless bills that might have given Owens a field day with his veto pen. Democratic leaders said at the start of the session they would not let members of either party divert attention from the main goal of fixing the state's budget problems - and they kept their word. No one contributed more to the eventual solution than Owens.

"The biggest issue of the session was putting something on the ballot for people to deal with our budget issues. We accomplished that," said Senate Majority Leader Ken Gordon, D-Denver. "I appreciate the fact that the governor worked in a bipartisan fashion to refer a solution to the people despite criticism from right-wing sources."

On some good bills, Democrats themselves couldn't agree, like a measure proposing a smoking ban in Colorado restaurants. That measure was defeated, but we urge its return next year. Owens hinted that he might have signed a version of the smoking ban if its provisions are sensible.

Owens also held the line on Democrats' efforts to change existing school-accountability laws, but we don't know why. One of his vetoes included House Bill 1216, which would have required the state and local districts to tend to low-performing schools, not just those deemed "unsatisfactory" three years in a row. Owens vowed to veto any bill that weakened Colorado's accountability laws, but this would have strengthened the effort. Low-performing schools now can languish without extra help as long as they're not unsatisfactory for three consecutive years.

Why should those schools be forced to struggle without the tools that could help them boost achievement? Owens admitted in his veto message that he supported parts of the bill and encouraged lawmakers to return next year with a version he could sign. We encourage both sides to find common ground, knowing that in the long run, it will help hundreds of students who are stuck in schools that don't meet state's standards.

Owens has several more bills on his desk, including two measures that deal with much-needed election reform. It's the bottom of the ninth. Election reform would be a home run for Colorado voters.

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