



House narrows authority of state conservation police

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SPRINGFIELD—Spurred by a gun-rights activist’s scrape with the law, the Illinois House voted Thursday to block state conservation police from going into someone’s home or onto their yards to enforce state hunting laws without search warrants.

The measure sponsored by House Minority Leader Jim Durkin, R-Western Springs, arose after National Rifle Association lobbyist Todd Vandermyde was cited last December by Department of Natural Resources police on private hunting ground.

While deer-hunting on private property near Lemont, Vandermyde was riding on an all-terrain vehicle with a loaded crossbow, which state law required be stored in a case while he was on the vehicle.

Vandermyde was hit with a \$120 fine, which he paid. Then, he approached Durkin with about drafting legislation to curtail the reach of DNR police to go onto private hunting areas unless there was certainty that violations of the state Wildlife Code were occurring.

“A young man brought it to my attention who was cited by conservation police officers in Lemont, Illinois, which happens to be part of my legislative district. I thought it was responsible to talk to this young man and decide how we got to that point,” Durkin acknowledged on the House floor.

Durkin said his legislation, which passed 102-5 and moves to the Senate, wouldn’t reverse Vandermyde’s violation nor restrict DNR officers from going onto open fields without warrants to enforce state hunting laws.

Earlier this month, in a Chicago Sun-Times report, the issue sparked sparring between both sides of the bitter gun-control debate in Springfield, with one leading gun-control advocate, Rep. Kelly Cassidy, D-Chicago, questioning the propriety of Vandermyde breaking state law then using his influence as a lobbyist to try changing the law.

Cassidy, who voted against Durkin's bill, didn't speak during floor debate Thursday.

But state Rep. Ann Williams, D-Chicago, another gun-control advocate, rose up to raise questions about the precedent the House was setting with the issue and voiced concern about any similar, potential efforts to water down safety components of the newly enacted concealed-carry law, which Vandermyde helped draft.

"I don't think the best genesis for changing those laws is something that stems out of a violation," Williams said.

House Majority Leader Barbara Flynn Currie, D-Chicago, Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, and Rep. Robyn Gabel, D-Evanston, were the other "no" votes on the legislation, which Durkin said was supported by state conservation police.

Durkin ended Thursday's debate with praise for Vandermyde's desire to change state hunting law.

"I think we often have situations where constituents or people in your district have had a certain matter that they disagree with, but that's what we do down here," Durkin said. "And in this case, this particular young man, I think, will be very happy if we pass this bill. I appreciate his willingness to come forward and be brave enough to tell us about that unfortunate situation."

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