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# Raise-the-age gun bill in peril as Texas House deadline looms

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(Texas Tribune) — The unexpected elation felt this week by gun control advocates and families of Uvalde shooting victims quickly faded Tuesday, when a bill that would raise the age to legally purchase semi-automatic rifles lost its newfound momentum and was left off the Texas House’s agenda ahead of a key deadline.

If the bill isn’t added to the agenda soon, the development could permanently obstruct its path to becoming law.

The proposal has long faced stiff odds in a state that has regularly loosened gun restrictions in recent years. But on Monday, in the aftermath of the deadly shooting in an Allen shopping mall, a House committee unexpectedly advanced the legislation in an 8-5 vote that included two Republicans supporting it.

That left little time for the bill to be added to the House’s calendar, however. The final day the House can pass bills is Thursday, and the chamber’s agenda must be approved 36 hours ahead of when they convene. That creates a de facto deadline of around 10 p.m. Tuesday for the measure to be placed on the calendar.

“We know that there’s five hours left to go before this bill — which is a small step, but it is a beginning of a good step — will die,” said Sonia Rodriguez of Communities Organized for Public Service/Metro Alliance, at an early evening press conference. “Something has to be done and it has to be done now.”

But it would take an unusual move. The committee that makes the calendars met Tuesday afternoon and approved the agendas for the rest of the week. The raise-the-age bill was not on it. And an online legislative portal showed Tuesday afternoon that the bill’s committee report had not been sent to the calendars committee, which is required before that committee can place it on the full chamber’s calendar.

House Bill 2744, filed by Democratic Rep. Tracy King of Batesville, would prohibit selling, renting, leasing or giving a semi-automatic rifle with a caliber greater than .22 that is capable of accepting a detachable magazine to a person younger than 21 years old — an increase from 18 years old. The proposal includes several exemptions that King said he had added after hearing concerns from constituents.

The opposition to the bill hasn’t been vocal in the Legislature, but Republican leadership is fiercely protective of gun rights and reluctant to advance anything that challenges

them. Gun advocates say the measure would do little to deter crime and only harm law-abiding gun owners. They also argue that gun ownership is an entrenched American right that shouldn't be infringed upon by the government.

Since getting a hearing last month — which in and of itself marked a milestone in a gun-friendly legislature — HB 2744 had been left in committee and was poised to be left there.

That is, until Monday, when dozens of supporters, including many relatives of people killed with guns, filled the Capitol to urge lawmakers to advance it. The committee was met with sobs and applause after the last-minute vote.

The gunman at Robb Elementary in Uvalde used an AR-15-style rifle, which he purchased within days of turning 18, after unsuccessfully trying to persuade relatives to illegally buy him a gun. He killed 19 children and two teachers at Robb Elementary School. Relatives of victims have been coming to the Capitol all year to urge lawmakers to raise the age, holding emotional press conferences and confronting lawmakers and state officials.

Their urgency only increased over the weekend, after a gunman killed eight people in Allen.

On Monday, at least two Republicans appeared swayed.

“I am not naive enough to think that laws alone will prevent the type of senseless violence that occurs all too frequently in our state,” said Rep. Justin Holland, a Rockwall Republican who voted to advance the bill out of committee, in a statement Monday. “But after listening to many hours of testimony over this session, I became convinced that this small change to the law might serve as a significant roadblock to a young person (not old enough to buy tobacco or alcohol) acquiring a specific type of semi-automatic rifle intent upon using it in a destructive and illegal manner.”

As it became clear Tuesday afternoon that the bill was again in danger, proponents voiced their frustration. Some left signs urging its passage outside the Calendars Committee's meeting room. Others protested outside the office of Rep. Ryan Guillen, R-Rio Grande City, the chair of the committee that advanced the bill Monday.

Guillen could not be immediately reached for comment about whether the committee report had been sent to the calendars committee or whether it would be before the deadline.

“I'm sickened that HB 2744 will not be brought to a full House vote,” said Rep. Jarvis Johnson, a Houston Democrat who voted to advance the bill Monday as a member of the select House committee. “For once, the legislature seemed to listen to its constituents & do the right thing after getting this bill out of committee.”

Lawmakers could use other approaches to revive the proposal if it misses the deadline. But advocates are realistic that the measure will most likely ultimately fail. Even if it were to pass the House — a tall request — it would still need to advance through a Senate that's perhaps even more skeptical of the idea.

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