

Speaker pans GOP bill blocking judicial review of Ohio abortion amendment

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A Republican lawmaker's pitch to strip judges of their ability to block abortion bans isn't going anywhere, House Speaker Jason Stephens said.

"This is Schoolhouse Rock-type stuff. We need to make sure that we have the three branches of the government," Stephens, R-Kitts Hill, told reporters Tuesday. "The constitution is what we abide by."

Rep. Jennifer Gross, R-West Chester, is working on a bill that would prohibit judges from interpreting Issue 1, a new constitutional standard on access to abortion and other reproductive rights. Ohio voters approved the measure, 57-43%, last week.

Gross told attendees of a Monday town hall that one of her goals was to prevent the kind of "judicial activism" that blocked a ban on most abortions last year. Gross' House seat is located in Butler County, whose voters backed Issue 1, but it was close, 50.6-49.4%.

Gross received some pushback at the event at a West Chester coffee shop. "Why won't you let us as the voters, who have made our voice clear as the majority of Ohio, be the voice?" asked West Chester resident Emily Jackson. "Why are you trying to strip the court of power because you disagree with it?"

"No, that's not it," replied Gross, while conceding she wasn't a legal expert. "It's because the legislature needs to have the final say."

But Stephens told reporters Tuesday that Ohio's judges would sort out which abortion laws violate the new constitutional rules. He also opposes putting the issue of abortion access back on the ballot immediately.

"We've had a couple of votes on that already," said Stephens, referencing abortion opponents' losses in August and November. "I think we all know what the result would be."

Stephens, an abortion opponent who voted against Issue 1, said it's more important to focus on reducing infant mortality by improving neonatal care and dialing down the heated conversation about abortion.

Gov. Mike DeWine, a Republican who campaigned against Issue 1, pointed out that every lawmaker's idea doesn't become a bill and every bill doesn't become law.

"There's 132 members of the General Assembly. On any one given day, any one member might think something or say something and might even introduce a bill, but that doesn't mean anything's going to happen," DeWine said.

But House Minority Leader Allison Russo, D-Upper Arlington, said some fringe ideas have a way of becoming reality in the GOP-controlled Legislature. She pointed to Republicans approving an August election shortly after eliminating most of them.

"It started as it's not going to happen and they got loud enough and it did," Russo said. "We've seen the extremists in that caucus gain power and successfully put things forward."