The Republican lawmakers who represent northeastern Colorado in the General Assembly are finding little to cheer about from the 2009 version of the 120-day session that adjourns Wednesday.

The Republicans, who make up only one-third of the Legislature's membership, were unanimous in their disdain for Senate Bill 228, which easily made their short list as the worst bill of the session.

"That bill blows the lid off government spending," said Rep. Cory Gardner, R-Yuma, adding that the Democrats balanced the budget for next year with fees increases totaling more than $1 billion and by raiding cash funds that come mostly from user fees.

Gardner includes in his fee increase total the $600 million hospital provider fee that was touted by Gov Bill Ritter as key to health care reform in Colorado. The Democrats claim House Bill 1292 will provide coverage to more than 100,000 uninsured Coloradoans by leveraging the provider fee with federal Medicaid dollars.

"We have a budget that protects our priorities of education, health care and economic development," Ritter said in signing Senate Bill 259, which outlines more than $19 billion worth of spending for the fiscal year that begin July 1. We have a budget that ensures vital safety-net services will continue for our most vulnerable populations, for people who live at the margins."

The Democrats argued repealing the Arveschoug-Bird amendment, which limits growth in general fund spending to six percent over the previous year, does not increase spending but gives lawmakers more flexibility in determining budget priorities. Currently, anything over 6 percent goes to funding highways and other capital development.

"To me the worst bills were 228 coupled with Senate Bill 108—a $250 million tax increase that will affect rural Colorado more than anywhere else," said Rep. Jerry Sonnenberg, R-Sterling.

SB 108—the so-called FASTER bill—increases vehicle registration by at least $41 per vehicle to raise funds for roads and bridges.

"Farmers and ranches have more vehicles and will have to pay those fees whether they use them one week out of the year or the entire year," said Sonnenberg, who both farms and ranches.

The newcomer to the northeast Colorado legislative block, Rep. Kevin Priola, R-Henderson, also combined 228 with 108 as being the worst for his district, which includes Brighton.

"With FASTER, we made more money available with a regressive tax on all drivers in the name of roads and bridges, and by repealing Arveschoug-Bird, we took away all the guarantees for funding transportation going forward," Priola said.

For a freshman, however, Priola was remarkably successful with his bills this year. All four of the House bills he sponsored and two Senate bills he carried in the House passed the General Assembly.

"I'm especially proud of my water bill," Priola said.

Senate Bill 147, introduced by Sen. Mary Hodge, D-Brighton, allows South Platte River irrigators to buy or lease available water to repay past depletions at the same time they are in water court with augmentation plans. Priola had little trouble getting the House to go along.

"My best bill with 147 because it actually put more water in the river to help somebody stay on the farm," Hodge said.

Hodge who moved fro the House to the Senate this year, said she was sorry there was not more bi-partisanship on the budget issues.

"My big disappointment is how absolutely partisan it has been," said Hodge. "The budget

came out of the House 53-12, but was absolutely party line in the Senate."

District 1 Sen. Greg Brophy, R-Wray, was among the 14 Senate Republicans fighting the Democratic budget plans at every turn.

"I feel I got several little personal victories but ultimately the taxpayers were just abused this session in a multiple number of ways," Brophy said. "The car tax, hospital tax, marriage tax and Senate Bill 228 all are direct affronts to the taxpayers of Colorado.

Brophy, however, ended the session on a high note when the House concurred with Senate amendments to HB 1180, which allows holders of concealed carry permits to buy a gun without have to undergo another background check by the gun dealer. The House originally passed a much weaker version of the bill.

Brophy said it would be a mistake for Ritter, a former Denver prosecutor, to veto the bill although it is strongly opposed by a county sheriff's association.

"I dare him to veto it," Brophy said. "It's a sensible bill and 19 Democrats voted for it along with every single Republican."

The area's lawmakers said Colorado would benefit from a bill co-sponsored by Sonnenberg and Brophy to increase the weight limits for trucks on state highways.

"That freight bill is something I've been working on since by first year here," Brophy said.

Sonnenberg said the increase weight limits—from 85,000 to 92,000 pounds—would help farmers and ranchers save money in hauling their agriculture products to market.

Among other highlights for Gardner was helping find future funding to help small communities meet federal wastewater and clean drinking water mandates.

Senate Bill 165, which Gardner sponsored in the House, will put $10 million a year into a Colorado Department of Health fund for water project grants once money severance tax revenue exceeds $200 million. Officials estimate it will be at least two years before grand money becomes available.

Gardner also tried to put a positive spin on defeated legislation he and Brophy carried to try to halt the new oil and gas rules from taking effect.

"A lot of people stood up and took notice of the bad things that are happening to our private property rights as a result of the job-killing oil and gas rules," he said.

Despite the end of the session, Gardner remained mum on his future political plans.

"I look forward to making an announcement soon regarding 4th Congressional District," he said.

It is widely assumed Gardner will make a run at the GOP nomination to challenge first-term U.S. Rep. Betsy Markey, D-Colo., next year.