

Local lawmakers confident of quick budget wrapup

By Mike Faulk
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YAKIMA, Wash. — Two Yakima Valley lawmakers in the thick of state budget and transportation negotiations say they're optimistic for a quick resolution to the stalemate, even as all the signs point to a drawn out special session.

While there was no need for a special session last year, the last two biennia budget-writing years in 2011 and 2013 both went into extra time. In 2013, negotiations went into late June and almost forced a partial government shutdown.

Chandler said he doesn't think this year will be a repeat of 2013 because lawmakers at least agree on the priorities, even if they can't agree how to address them.

"I remain optimistic because I know there have been discussions. Offers and counteroffers are being made," said Granger Republican Rep. Bruce Chandler, the ranking member of the House Appropriations Committee. "I think at this point most of the differences are manageable in negotiations."

The difference is whether the state can continue without new revenue sources in the face of a court order demanding more be spent on education and mental health services. Senate Republicans say they have a plan that does that, while House Democrats say it relies on gimmicks and ignores other financial demands the state should address, such as long-delayed pay increases for teachers and the restoration of cuts made to departments during the Great Recession.

Democrats are emphasizing a capital gains tax they project to raise \$1.5 billion in new revenue, all of it coming from the wealthiest in the state. Republicans such as Chandler argue those taxes are volatile and hard to project year-to-year.

The Senate's budget proposal includes a levy swap that would reduce local levies for schools while raising state property taxes. Republicans call the plan "revenue neutral," reducing local taxes in some areas while raising them in others, but even conservative ballot initiative crusader Tim Eyman has come out against the proposal, and few Democrats have shown interest in supporting it.

Sen. Curtis King, R-Yakima, said the Senate plan falls in line with a state Supreme Court order that said the state was relying too much on local levies to fund schools.

“It’s a matter of balance and being able to say the state is meeting the requirement,” King said.

King, the chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee, has been deep in negotiations for a transportation revenue package lawmakers have been trying to pass for nearly two years.

In February, the Senate passed a \$15 billion transportation package for the next two years that includes an 11.7-cent gas tax hike to be phased in over the next three years. So far, the proposal hasn’t come up for a vote in the House, and King said he doesn’t expect that to happen until agreement is reached on the general operating budget.

But negotiations have been ongoing with the House, King said. As with previous attempts, what separates Democrats and Republicans is whether reforms that reduce spending and costs should be tied to the revenue increase.

King said he thinks the two sides are closer to agreement on a transportation package than the general budget.

“Transportation is usually thought of as nonpartisan, so we have advantage from that standpoint,” King said. “But it’s one of the rare times we’re also passing new laws tied to the transportation budget.”

Although they encourage optimism, King and Chandler, who both said in January they expected the Legislature to adjourn without a special session, wouldn’t say how or when they expect a deal to be struck.

“I don’t have a basis on which to make any kind of a guesstimate,” King said.