

# Will lawmakers finish in time? Shutdown looms as state budget debate continues

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Work crews repair and clean stonework on the Legislative Building at the state Capitol in Olympia in September 2014. STEVE BLOOM — Staff photographer file, 2014 [Buy Photo](#)

Two years ago, during the last state government shutdown scare, lawmakers announced with five days to go that they had reached agreement on the major parts of a new two-year budget.

Even then, it was a scramble to get the deal sealed by July 1 to avert lapses in state services.

This year, lawmakers appear to be running behind even 2013's protracted schedule. On Thursday, five days before the deadline to avoid shutting down state agencies or reducing operations, legislators made no pronouncements of budget breakthroughs.

Instead, Democrats in the state House and Republicans in the state Senate promoted rival options for keeping government running should they fail to reach a budget agreement in time.

Senate Republicans proposed an emergency one-month budget extension that would keep the government operating through the month of July. Meanwhile, House Democrats urged GOP senators to approve the basic, underlying budget Democrats introduced earlier in the week.

That two-year spending plan from Democrats — which doesn't include a separate Democratic bill that would raise revenue by limiting or ending several tax exemptions — would keep state government operating through June 2017.

If lawmakers don't approve new appropriations by Tuesday, state government will partially shut down Wednesday. About 26,000 state workers have been notified that they will be temporarily laid off if a shutdown occurs.

The two sides remain apart on how much revenue should come from eliminating or limiting tax preferences. Senate Republicans on Wednesday suggested the state reap \$126 million from ending tax breaks over the next two years, while House Democrats' latest proposal would net the state \$356 million.

They also disagree about tuition policy, with Republicans advocating a 25 percent tuition cut and Democrats proposing a tuition freeze.

Democrats previously proposed a new tax on capital gains and an increase in business and occupation taxes, but those taxes are now off the table.

It wasn't clear Thursday whether lawmakers were on track to have even an informal budget agreement by Saturday, the end of the Legislature's second 30-day overtime session.

"We do not have agreement on the major elements," said Reuven Carlyle, D-Seattle, and the chairman of the House Finance Committee. "We have a general framework and lots of conversations."

Two years ago, lawmakers announced a handshake deal June 27, and both chambers passed a budget the next day. Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee signed that budget into law June 30, 2013, just in time to avert a government shutdown.

On Thursday, the Senate's chief budget writer, Republican Sen. Andy Hill of Redmond, said budget negotiators "are probably close" to having an informal budget deal in the next couple of days.

But he said the state should have a backup plan ready this year to prevent a shutdown, just in case. While Hill said he would prefer that the Legislature avoid enacting an emergency one-month budget, “it is important to have a contingency plan.”

“We don’t think we’re ever going to have to use it,” Hill said.

House budget writer Ross Hunter, D-Medina, said he and other budget negotiators were still working to decide most aspects of the budget Thursday, “so that we have a process that gets us out of town on Saturday with a deal.” Even if lawmakers adjourned Saturday with a deal, they still most likely would need to call a third special session to approve it and send it to Gov. Jay Inslee’s desk.

Hunter called Hill’s one-month contingency budget plan “a potential distraction.”

“There’s no reason for us not to agree on a budget between now and Saturday, the end of the (special) session,” Hunter said. “I would love to have that happen.”

Even so, community members who rely on state resources were beginning to worry Thursday.

Chris Chisholm, co-owner of Wolf Camp in Puyallup, said he is looking for alternate places to host youth summer camp activities next month. If the state government partially shuts down July 1, about 100 of his campers would be unable to use Lake Sammamish State Park during the first two weeks of July, Chisholm said.

All state parks would close during a partial government shutdown, which Chisholm said would undoubtedly affect other summer camps, too.

“That’s a lot of child care to try to rearrange, especially for those camps that are used as childcare primarily,” Chisholm said.

A shutdown would also hurt food banks and other hunger relief programs, said Helen McGovern-Pilant, the executive director of the Emergency Food Network in Pierce County. About 40 programs served by the Emergency Food Network rely on Food Assistance Program money from the state, she said.

That funding would be suspended if the government shuts down Wednesday, which McGovern-Pilant said could lead to food banks missing rent payments and potentially losing their leases.

“When you’re a small food bank and you’re run mostly by volunteers, there are no reserves,” McGovern-Pilant said. “They’re on a very tight budget, so any hiccup like this is very scary.”

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