

Budget bill's done, but Legislature still isn't

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Gov. Jay Inslee Tuesday night signed the state's 2015-17 operating budget, narrowly avoiding a government shutdown. But lawmakers Wednesday morning failed to approve a crucial bill needed to make the budget work.

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OLYMPIA — With about 20 minutes before parts of the government would have shut down, Gov. Jay Inslee Tuesday night signed the state's [2015-17 operating budget](#).

The \$38.2 billion budget funds “important priorities brought to the table by both Republicans and Democrats, east and west, rural and urban,” Inslee said before signing the bill shortly after 11:30 p.m.

But even as lawmakers applauded the accomplishment, they became locked in a stalemate that threatened progress on a handful of other bills, including a statewide transportation package.

Those bills included HB 2266, which would delay the start of [Initiative 1351](#), the class-size-reduction measure voters approved in November. Lawmakers have said they cannot find the billions of dollars needed to pay for it, and the budget just signed by Inslee doesn't fund it.

When HB 2266 came to the Senate floor shortly after 5 a.m. on Wednesday morning, it failed to gain the two-thirds majority vote it needed. After the vote, the Senate adjourned until Friday.

HB 2266 passed the Democratic-controlled House late Monday night by a two-thirds majority in that chamber. But finding enough votes in the GOP-controlled Senate Wednesday morning proved impossible, as Democrats first pressed for Republicans to agree to pass a separate bill that died earlier in the session that changes some [high school student assessments](#).

Without a change to a biology exam included in those assessments, about 2,000 Washington students would be at risk for not graduating high school.

The stalemate appeared to stall progress on a handful of other bills, consisting largely of the remaining votes needed to pass a [\\$16 billion, 16-year statewide transportation package](#) that lawmakers have been trying to approve for years.

House members were sent home Wednesday morning at about 3:30 a.m. without finishing votes on the transportation package.

Around that time, House Majority Leader Pat Sullivan, D-Covington, spelled out a handful of options for when an agreement could be reached. Lawmakers could finish their work on Wednesday, return for a special session in the fall, or start up again in the next regular session in January.

“Once we have an agreement, it’s just a matter of getting four or five bills passed,” Sullivan said.

Lawmakers Monday evening had moved quickly to pass an [operating budget](#) — without which parts of the state government would shut down Wednesday — and to begin work on passing the transportation package. Legislators on Tuesday night additionally passed a capital construction budget, which Inslee also signed.

Not everyone was happy with the operating budget agreement and how it came about.

The state Department of Natural Resources received \$1.2 million, or about 27 percent of the funding that it had requested, to improve its wildfire-fighting capabilities, according to Commissioner of Public Lands Peter Goldmark.

The department had [asked lawmakers for \\$4.5 million](#) to add engines and crews, as well as for more training and attack crews for the agency’s wildfire-fighting helicopters.

Even as the state continues to recover from last year’s record-setting wildfires, which destroyed more than 300 homes, officials have been predicting another dangerous year.

As lawmakers cast votes for the budget Monday evening, the City of Wenatchee was grappling with a wildfire that scorched [24 homes and a handful of businesses](#).

“I’m extremely disappointed in the lack of understanding from the Legislature,” said Goldmark, who spoke from Wenatchee Tuesday, adding later: “It could be a long, difficult, dangerous, destructive wildfire season.”

The short amount of time between the budget bill’s release and its approval — only a handful of hours — irked Toby Nixon, president of the Washington Coalition for Open Government.

“The people of the state do not have a fair opportunity to review what their legislators are proposing and give them feedback,” said Nixon, a former state lawmaker.

As a legislator, “you might be able to flip through it with your thumb like a deck of cards, but you certainly can’t study it and see what [measures] have been slipped in at the last minute,” he added.

Nixon said he would like a waiting period between the two so citizens and lawmakers can review the budget.

But even some lawmakers who voted against the budget Tuesday were talking up its accomplishments.

Rep. Graham Hunt, R-Orting, was one of a handful who voted against the budget.

Among other things, he opposed it out of concern over one of the tax exemptions, and for spending too much money generally. But Hunt praised its investment in teacher and state worker salaries and its exclusion of a capital-gains tax.

“We weren’t trying to stop it. We were trying to say it still hasn’t gotten to the point it needs to be,” said Hunt, describing his vote.

Sen. Jeanne Kohl-Welles, D-Seattle, hailed the funding in the budget for K-12 education, the reduction in college tuition and spending on the social safety net.

But, “a lot of my voting nay was more [about] what could have been,” said Kohl-Welles.

As reasons for her vote against the budget, she cited failures to adopt a capital-gains tax and to find a plan to reform local property-tax levies per the state Supreme Court's K-12 education funding order, known as McCleary.

Kohl-Welles said she thought it was "a strong possibility" that lawmakers will have to return for another session to deal with levy reform.

Information from The Seattle Times archives is included in this report. Joseph O'Sullivan: 360-236-8268 or josullivan@seattletimes.com. On Twitter [@OlympiaJoe](https://twitter.com/OlympiaJoe)