

Washington has a budget, but Legislature isn't finished



Washington Gov. Jay Inslee gestures with his pen after he signed the two-year state operating budget just before late Tuesday, June 30, 2015, at the Capitol in Olympia, Wash. Included in the budget are cuts in tuition for college students and an increase in funding of the state's K-12 education system.

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Associated Press
The Bellingham Herald
July 1, 2015

SEATTLE

Washington state has a budget for the next two years. The government has not shut down. So why haven't state lawmakers gone home for summer vacation? They still have work to do.

The Legislature worked until dawn Wednesday trying to resolve policy issues related to the budget and a standoff in the Senate over a voter-approved class-size initiative, plus a few other smaller issues preventing them from adjourning their third special session. Lawmakers may try again next week after the holiday weekend.

The class size initiative, 1351, matters because the \$38.2 billion budget signed by the governor just before midnight Tuesday does not include the estimated \$2 billion in state

dollars needed to hire more teachers and shrink class sizes in grades 4 through 12 for the next two school years.

Gov. Jay Inslee encouraged lawmakers to keep going.

"I believe it is important for the Legislature to find a solution that results in a balanced budget sooner rather than later," he said in a statement. "We are so close. I encourage legislators to complete their work."

Washington has a budget now with a \$2 billion hole and while lawmakers aren't required to fix that problem immediately, David Schumacher, director of the state Office of Financial Management, said he hoped they would do so in the next week or so.

"It is a problem. It's a problem that needs to be addressed but it's not necessarily illegal," he said. He added, however, if the initiative is not suspended, lawmakers will need to find \$2 billion either by cutting the rest of the budget or finding a new revenue source.

The House voted 72-26 on Monday to suspend the class size initiative for four years. The Senate did not have enough votes to get the required two-thirds majority to suspend the initiative.

Accusations have been tossed by members of both parties about who is to blame for the stalemate.

Sen. Andy Billig, D-Spokane, blames Senate Republican leadership for trying to railroad Democrats into voting for the suspension without the benefit of a thoughtful discussion first on how best to meet the needs of Washington's school children.

"Burying this initiative for the next four years is not in their best interest," Billig said. "There are lots of other options. The voters deserve a thoughtful discussion, not a suspension of their will in the middle of the night."

Some Democrats tried to cut a last-minute deal early Wednesday to trade a vote on a bill that would let high school seniors who didn't pass the required statewide science exam earn a diploma anyway for a vote for the initiative suspension, but Republicans said no.

Senate Majority Leader Mark Schoesler, R-Ritzville, said an understanding that the class-size initiative would have to be suspended has been part of budget negotiations

since January. He called the refusal by Senate Democrats to vote with Republicans a temper tantrum.

"If you actually thought you were going to fund 1351, you haven't been in Olympia this year," Schoesler said, noting that none of the budget proposals from the governor or either chamber included money for smaller classes in grades 4 through 12.

Superintendent of Public Instruction Randy Dorn says lawmakers have a bunch of issues they need to resolve before they can tell the Washington Supreme Court they have finished fully funding basic education. The class-size initiative is just part of the problem.

Unless lawmakers can reach agreement and adjourn beforehand, the current special session ends July 27. In addition to resolving I-1351, the Legislature still needs to pass two bills tied to a transportation revenue package, as well as a bonding bill tied to the state construction budget Inslee has signed.

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