

In Our View: 60 Days Likely Not Enough

Legislature has too much to address and is too far behind on education funding

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It could, it seems, take more than 60 days to adequately explain the issues facing the Legislature as the 2016 session convenes today. And with the session scheduled to last 60 days, that assessment highlights the daunting task facing lawmakers and the need for focus and prioritization.

In short, not every item that deserves attention is going to receive it, and there will be plenty of unfinished business that is carried over to the 2017 docket.

Undoubtedly, that overabundance of work and shortage of time is the fault of lawmakers themselves. The most inescapable task is dealing with adequate funding for public K-12 education, an issue that has received inadequate attention in recent years. Since the state Supreme Court issued a 2012 ruling in *McCleary v. Washington*, lawmakers have made incremental progress when leaps and bounds should have been the goal.

This year, Gov. Jay Inslee has said, they are hoping to “agree on a road map,” but he acknowledges that, “consensus on these issues is going to take longer than a 60-day session.” The “road map” should have been designed four years ago, and lawmakers should have been much farther along on their journey. As it is, they return to work facing a \$100,000-a-day fine levied by the Supreme Court for contempt because they have not made enough progress.

A reasonable itinerary for arriving at acceptable school funding decisions must be the top priority for the upcoming session, but it is not the only one. Depending upon a possible court ruling, lawmakers might have to decide whether to pass along to voters a two-thirds majority vote for tax increases or see the state sales tax decrease — as dictated by voter-approved Initiative 1366. And Inslee, in a supplemental budget proposal announced late last year, requested increased funding for mental health services — an expense frequently trimmed during the budget-squeezing years of the Great Recession — and for \$178 million to cover last summer’s unprecedented wildfire season. Legislators also would be wise to prepare for large future expenditures to deal with wildfires, as increased frequency and ferocity appears to be the new normal.

Because of such crucial statewide concerns, this promises to be an unusual 60-day session. While odd years are dictated to be longer, budget-writing sessions, even years typically are reserved for budget tweaks, responses to unexpected needs, and pet issues for individual legislators. It might be difficult to carve out time for such side projects with serious structural needs on the agenda, and Inslee says, “I see no reason why lawmakers shouldn’t be able to complete work on time.” That might mean that

rather than digging up solutions, they will prod the ground a bit and then decide to go home.

We hope not. And we hope that intransigence on both sides can give way to thoughtful compromise — despite the added difficulty of this being an election year. Democrats just might have to find a way to trim some social services in order to help pay for education and for mental health coverage; Republicans just might have to consider some new taxes or tax increases in order to fund schools or adjust to a reduction in the sales tax.

At the crux of it all will be the state's system of paying for how we teach our children. Rep. Paul Harris, R-Vancouver, said: "We are going to possibly completely redo how we pay for education in this state."

If that's the case, legislators better get to work.