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## Senate passes budget update

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Senate Bill 6246, the 2016 supplemental operating budget, passed 25-22. Among Spokane-area legislators, Republicans Mike Baumgartner, Brian Dinsel, Mike Padden and Mark Schoelser voted yes; Democrat Andy Billig voted no.

OLYMPIA – A spending plan with limited increases to existing programs and no tax increases passed the Senate Friday despite critics' complaints it doesn't do enough to fight homelessness or improve schools.

Supporters countered that it addresses true emergencies like the cost of last summer's wildfires and recognizes the state's revenue projections dropped recently, but mostly tweaks the two-year budget approved in 2015.

"The resources simply aren't here to add hundreds of millions of dollars of additional spending," Sen. Mark Schoesler, R-Ritzville said.

The supplemental operating budget passed 25-22 after more than three hours of debate on amendments, mostly from Democrats who tried unsuccessfully to add money for teacher salaries, programs for homeless children or technical training classes in community colleges. They also failed in efforts to set aside money for the \$100,000-per-day fine the state Supreme Court has levied for failing to provide enough money for public schools or to reject a plan that would combine two of the state's older pension systems which Republicans say will save money.

One of the biggest debates was over a proposal to set aside \$90 million in an emergency fund for school districts in case the Legislature doesn't solve a looming problem with property tax rules that will mandate a decrease in their levy authority. If the Legislature can agree on a way to fix what's known as the "levy cliff" that money won't be spent, Democrats said, but school districts will be able to count on it as a type of insurance plan when they are preparing budgets next year.

"This is urgent. This could throw schools into chaos," said Sen. Andy Billig, D-Spokane, who noted Spokane Public Schools stands to lose some \$15 million with the rollback in levy authority. They could be forced to send out layoff notices and cut programs if the Legislature is slow to act next year, he said.

But Sen. Bruce Dammeier, R-Puyallup, said a vote for that amendment really signals a person believes the Legislature doesn't have the political will to fix the levy law.

“If you’re committed to solving the problem, vote no. If you’re not sure you’re committed, vote yes,” he said.

The amendment received 25 votes, which is a majority, but under current Senate rules, a budget amendment requires a super-majority of 30 votes, although the budget itself does not.

The Senate budget is significantly different from the plan the House passed Thursday. Budget writers from both chambers must now negotiate a compromise spending plan that can pass by March 10 or face an overtime session.