Washington lawmakers heading into overtime

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OLYMPIA — Unable to agree to negotiate, much less reach, a two-year state budget deal during their regularly scheduled legislative session, Washington lawmakers are likely to start an overtime special session Monday.

Lawmakers are expected to break for the weekend Friday, with just a few lawmakers on hand Sunday to officially end the 105-day session. Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee said he would announce his plans Friday, but it is expected that he will call them back into session at the start of next week.

Democratic House Majority Leader Pat Sullivan said Thursday that a majority of lawmakers would remain in their home districts and that just the budget negotiators would return to the Capitol next week.
"This is a challenge, and I recognize that," Inslee said Thursday of the legislative standoff. "A challenge in a divided government requires good faith, it requires sincerity, it requires compromise. We're not seeing that right now."

Inslee said he planned to talk with Republican leadership from the Senate to encourage them to enter into negotiations with House Democrats.

As they work to craft a two-year state operating budget, lawmakers must also comply with a 2012 state Supreme Court ruling that they must meet the state's constitutional requirement to fully fund the state's basic education system. The court has said that the state has until Sept. 1, 2018, to do that, but that the details — including funding — must be in place before the Legislature adjourns this year.

While the state has made progress since the original ruling, the biggest piece remaining of the court order is figuring out how much the state must provide for teacher salaries. School districts currently pay a big chunk of those salaries with local property-tax levies.

Among the differences between the budgets put forth by both chambers is how they address the local property tax levies. Unlike the Senate plan, which would replace local school levies with a statewide uniform rate earmarked for schools, the House plan would lower the local levy rate, but not eliminate them completely. The two-year plan put forth by the House also seeks about $3 billion in taxes that the full chamber has not voted on, including a new capital gains tax.

Both chambers have been volleying their complaints at each other through press conferences, where the script has been consistent for several weeks: Senate Republicans argue that until House Democrats pass the tax bills that fund their budget proposal it's impossible to know what they're negotiating; Democrats in turn point to the fact the Republican plan — including the property tax plan that raises the rates for some districts while lowering it for others — is contingent on a referendum, meaning that voters could overturn the entire plan if they vote against it in November.

"We've been willing to go to the table and have those negotiations," Sullivan said. "I don't know how you can begin any negotiation until you have a willing partner."

Republican Senate Majority Leader Mark Schoesler noted that a bipartisan subgroup of lawmakers have been meeting on the education funding part of the budget, and that informal conversations between the opposing sides are in fact occurring. Schoesler said that lawmakers need to ensure they agree on the education element of the budget before they can properly negotiate the broader overall budget.

"We are dealing with the most complex problem in a generation," he said.