Lawmakers playing game of chicken as shutdown of government looms

For the third time in the past five years, Washington state is preparing for a partial shut down of government.

And for the third time the state is wasting precious tax dollars preparing for an event lawmakers have the power to prevent. So why does this keep happening?

Partisanship. It’s as simple — and as frustrating — as that.
The Democrat-controlled House and Republican-controlled Senate aren’t willing to compromise on the state budget for the next two years nor have they come to an agreement on how to fully fund basic education — the edict issued five years ago by the state Supreme Court.

As a result, lawmakers are playing an expensive game of chicken.

The deadlines for the end of the regular session as well as the first and second overtime sessions are artificial, as in there is no real consequence of not getting the job done.

But it gets very real on July 1, as that is the first day of the new fiscal year for the state. If no budget has been approved, there is no money to fund state government.

State agencies have started informing workers and contractors of what will occur if partial shutdown of the government is mandated.

The Herald of Everett reported this week that contractors have been or will be getting letters warning that their state contracts could be suspended in a shutdown. Roughly 62,000 state government workers have received notice of a potential layoff.

“There is a very high probability it is an unwarranted exercise,” said Loren Doolittle, the Archaeology and Historic Preservation Department’s grants manager said of shutdown preparations. “Why in the world are they waiting until the 11th hour and creating this additional workload and cost?”

Why indeed?

If the government is shut down, only essential services will be spared, much like was done when the federal government did in the wake of a game of chicken in Congress a few years back.
State prisons will, of course, remain open. But they will not be allowed to take in any new inmates, according to their contingency plan. In addition, thousands of community corrections officers will be partially or entirely furloughed, resulting in less supervision of convicted criminals.

And, according to the Herald, state parks would be closed just in time for the long Fourth of July holiday weekend.

Not cool.

When the impasse is settled, and it will eventually be because of pressure from voters (taxpayers), expect lawmakers to authorize back pay for all those who were sent home.

That is what the federal government did then and it was an outrage — and it would be an outrage if it happened in this state.

The Legislature needs to act, and act now.

The sense of urgency lawmakers will feel in the last few days of June needs to be felt now. The budget needs to get done right and so, too, does school funding. This is too important to be left to whomever blinks first in a game of chicken.
Editorials are the opinion of the Union-Bulletin's Editorial Board. The board is composed of Brian Hunt, Rick Eskil, James Blethen and Alasdair Stewart