‘Decisions are made’: Lawmakers — and public — will get little time to review budget

Originally published June 29, 2017 at 10:25 am Updated June 29, 2017 at 12:14 pm

The state Capitol in Olympia, where lawmakers are trying to wrap up a new two-year state budget. (Mike Siegel/The Seattle Times)

An actual draft of Washington’s proposed two-year budget might not be released until as late as Thursday night. The public could have less than 24 hours to see the details before the Legislature votes.
OLYMPIA — Citizens of Washington: Good luck figuring out what’s in the new state budget before it gets a vote by the Legislature.

It took lawmakers later than any time in recent memory to reach a tentative deal on the 2017-19 operating budget.

Yet, when legislative leaders announced a “deal in principle” Wednesday, they refused to share the details of a two-year budget that’s expected to exceed $41 billion.

Now, the actual bill might not be public until as late as Thursday night — meaning the public could have less than 24 hours to see the details before the Legislature votes.

But at this point, lawmakers reviewing the bill might not get any chance for input, anyway.

“The decisions are made,” said Rep. June Robinson, D-Everett, one of the budget negotiators. “What we’re waiting for now is staff to do all the work that needs to be done to balance everything.”

Robinson said she doesn’t anticipate a public hearing on the budget before it gets a floor vote. But citizens have had months to vet the ideas that went into the deal, she added, since it’s a combination of the Republican and Democratic plans passed earlier this year.

“I feel like we were able to use public input to develop the final compromise budget,” she said. “I understand that other people might not feel that way.”
Democratic budget writer Rep. Timm Ormsby of Spokane said he expected legislative leaders to give a press briefing on the budget Thursday.

At least one lawmaker says the bill includes elements of the [GOP’s property-tax shift plan](#).

Sen. Jamie Pedersen, D-Seattle, said he didn’t know details of the final budget but that briefings in recent weeks indicated “the vast majority of the revenue we’re going to raise is going to come from property taxes.”

That means local school levies will go down and the state levy will go up.

But outside of that, before a caucus briefing Thursday, “There are almost no members who have any sense of the details in the budget,” Pedersen said.

To avoid a partial state-government shutdown, lawmakers must vote on the budget and get it to Gov. Jay Inslee for his signature by midnight Friday.

That’s a short timeline for anyone interested in the fine print of a document expected to span hundreds of pages, raise some taxes and change government policies.

The bill’s schedule leaves lawmakers with little time to examine what they’re expected to approve.

Sen. Reuven Carlyle, D-Seattle, said he couldn’t divulge details of the agreement, and was awaiting the briefing from legislative leaders.

But, “it seems … that what we have here is a Democratic budget with Democratic values, and a Republican tax plan, with Republican values,” he said.

Still, “I don’t think it’s fair to categorically jump to conclusions, because the details matter,” he said.

Carlyle expressed frustration with the lack of transparency at so late a time in the process.
“I don’t think there’s anybody in this Capitol who’s defending this,” said Carlyle, who described his feeling a “very high consternation level.”

“The numbers matter, the details matter, the real impacts for real people living real lives matter,” said Carlyle, who as a representative was chairman of the House Finance Committee, which deals with tax policy.

Pedersen agreed.

“I suspect there will be a bunch of things that are just errors and that we’re gonna have to fix in the supplemental, and hopefully they won’t screw up too many lives in the meantime,” he said.

Inslee’s office also will be pressed for time to review the budget compromise.

“Last I heard is pieces were being sent over for staff to start reviewing but I don’t believe a full budget document has been sent to us,” Inslee spokeswoman Jaime Smith wrote in an email.

“I think by the time the full bill is printed our team will have been able to get started on some of the bigger pieces, such as education,” she added. “It’s not ideal but our folks are digging on everything as soon as they get it.”

Lawmakers’ work this year includes what’s expected to be a historic restructuring of Washington’s K-12 school system.

That comes in a push to satisfy the state Supreme Court’s McCleary decision, which declared Washington in violation of its own constitution by underfunding schools.

Scuttlebutt in Olympia has indicated that months of secret negotiations produced a plan that includes an expansion of online sales-tax collections and a version of the property-tax plan introduced by Republicans earlier this year.
The property-tax solution is geared at helping the state pay for teacher and other school-worker salaries as required by the court. School districts use local property-tax levies to cover a chunk of those costs.

In its original form, that plan would increase levy rates in “property-rich” school districts like Seattle and Bellevue, and lower rates in districts in other parts of that state.

Democrats had originally opposed that solution as putting too much pressure on homeowners, and also primarily raising taxes around the Puget Sound region. They had preferred a capital-gain tax or changes to the state’s business-and-occupation tax to raise more money for schools.

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