We have a state budget deal – and lots of unanswered questions

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The News Tribune

June 28, 2017 10:00 AM

Top state lawmakers stayed up all night Tuesday hammering out a deal on a new two-year state budget that they say will prevent a government shutdown July 1.

Republican Senate Majority Leader Mark Schoesler talks to the media in the Senate wings after a budget deal was announced, Wednesday, June 28, 2017, in Olympia, Wash. Lawmakers say they have reached a deal on a state budget in time to avoid a partial government shutdown. They offered practically no other details Wednesday. Rachel La Corte AP
Even though negotiators announced the deal early Wednesday, the public won’t get to know much of anything about it until at least noon Thursday — 36 hours before the governor must sign it into law.

Legislators also plan to wait until noon Thursday to release their plan to comply with a court order issued in the McCleary case to fully fund public schools. Washington state has been in contempt of court since 2014 over the Legislature’s inability to produce that plan.

It wasn’t clear whether there would be time for a public hearing on either proposal. House Majority Leader Pat Sullivan, D-Covington, said he thinks the time line would be too short.

If a budget isn’t signed into law by midnight June 30, most state government agencies will fully or partially shut down.

“This is not an ideal situation,” Sullivan said Wednesday. “I would have rather been here actually in April providing you with copies of the budget, and having a little more time. But we’re here today in a situation where we absolutely do not want to shut down government.”

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Senate Majority Leader Mark Schoesler, R-Ritzville, said his first priority is getting lawmakers who must vote on the budget up to speed and then releasing details to the public.

Before even that happens, Schoesler said, staffers working to draft the plan needed to take a break following lengthy negotiations.

“Well because we finished so early this morning, we haven’t been able to brief our members, our staff is taking a little well-deserved rest before they write this budget,” he said. “So we’ll bring our members together very soon and getting the details out.”

Lawmakers are already behind where they were two years ago, when the state government came within a half hour of shutting down. That year, they announced a tentative agreement on a budget in the early morning hours of June 27, three days before the shutdown deadline.

Later the same day, legislative leaders told media and members of the public some of the key details of the plan, including how much the budget would spend overall and how much it would put toward public schools. Leaders also said the 2015 plan would include
money for state worker contracts, cost-of-living raises for teachers and a cut in tuition at public colleges and universities.

This year, lawmakers are saying they won’t share that level of detail until Thursday — two days later than they did in 2015.

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Toby Nixon, the president of the Washington Coalition for Open Government

School district officials and open-government advocates have been among the groups speaking out against the tight window for them to scrutinize the proposed budget before it likely passes into law.

For the past several months, lawmakers have been negotiating the deal behind closed doors.

Toby Nixon, the president of the Washington Coalition for Open Government, said the short time line makes it “just impossible to do any kind of meaningful review.”

That could lead to mistakes that someone outside the formal process might ordinarily catch and prevents the public from getting a reasonable amount of time to weigh in through phone calls, emails and advocacy, Nixon said.

Nixon once served in the state House and is currently a member of the Kirkland City Council.

Such review might not change large swaths of the budget, but scrutiny could easily highlight errors or push small changes, he said.

“Basically the leadership or the budget negotiators are just asking people to trust that they got it right,” Nixon said.

Dan Steele, lobbyist for the Washington Association of School Administrators, said it’s concerning that the state’s 295 school districts won’t have much time to review how lawmakers’ school-funding overhaul would affect them.

Steele said school district officials don’t think they’ll get an advance look at the policy changes that are designed to correct a school-funding crisis that has been 40 years in the making.

“If there’s something wrong with it, there’s no time for them to go back and change it,” he said. “Even if there’s something screwy, I think the skids are greased and they’re going to roll it out and pass it quickly and be done.”
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Dan Steele, lobbyist for the Washington Association of School Administrators

Though lawmakers have yet to disclose specifics, or even the broad strokes of their budget, they did say it should bring the state in compliance with the McCleary decision.

In recent years, lawmakers have poured billions in the K-12 system to comply with various parts of McCleary.

Yet they left one of the most difficult portions of the ruling for last: an order to take on the full cost of teacher and other school-employee salaries that currently are being supplemented by local levies.

The complex task fell upon a divided Legislature, forcing compromise between two parties that have fought for starkly different solutions to the problem. The state House is ruled by a Democratic majority. The state Senate is controlled by a Republican-led coalition, with the help of one conservative Democrat.

Sullivan said Wednesday both sides made concessions in the budgeting process to meet and pay for McCleary, without noting what they were. Democrats, he said, might be happy with some parts of the plan, but admitted there were portions Democrats had “to give a little on.”

Sullivan did say no portion of the budget would be sent to voters for approval — meaning an earlier GOP proposal to put their school plan on the ballot appears to be dead.

Little other information was provided Wednesday by legislative leaders. In a press release announcing the handshake deal at about 9:30 a.m., Gov. Jay Inslee’s office offered no details of the plan, other than that “the agreement covers spending and resource levels.”

Steele, the lobbyist for the school administrators, said the rushed process this year could mean the Legislature has to come back next year and fix a lot of problems.

“A lot of the work we’re going to have to do next January is saying, ‘Remember that thing you passed 6 months ago? There’s a lot of changes that need to happen,’” Steele said.

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In this photo taken April 26, 2017, the Washington State Capitol, also known as the Legislative Building, is seen in Olympia, Wash. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson) Elaine Thompson AP

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