

Washington lawmakers racing budget through Legislature to avoid shutdown

By Melissa Santos
msantos@thenewstribune.com
June 29, 2017 12:36 PM



The steps of the Legislative Building in Olympia are shown earlier this month. State lawmakers are racing to approve a budget in time to avoid a shut down of government services July 1. They say they have a deal that will allow them to make the June 30 deadline, but the rushed time line means little opportunity for the public to see what's in it. Steve Bloom sbloom@theolympian.com

The public will get less than a day to review a new two-year spending plan that involves a monumental shift in how Washington state pays for schools.

State lawmakers originally said the details of their compromise budget would be available for the public to review at noon Thursday.

Now it looks like the budget — which is expected to include several hundred pages of detailed policy and spending changes — might not be available for review until Friday morning.

That gives the public fewer than 24 hours to review the complex document before Gov. Jay Inslee must sign it into law to avoid a partial shutdown of state government.

If the budget isn't signed by midnight Friday, about 32,000 state workers would be temporarily laid off and most state agencies would fully or partially close down.

In scattered briefings with the media, top lawmakers released some broad details of the budget Thursday afternoon after meeting with their colleagues to discuss the plan behind closed doors.

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Pierce County Councilman Derek Young, D-Gig Harbor

While they released some information about their plans to overhaul public schools, they couldn't provide detailed information about the taxes that would pay for it all.

At times on Thursday, lawmakers provided conflicting estimates about how much their budget would spend and how much the state's property-tax rate would rise as part of it.

State Rep. June Robinson, D-Everett and the vice chairwoman of the budget-writing House Appropriations Committee, said lawmakers still were waiting for legislative staff to finish writing the budget most of Thursday, which is why firm details weren't immediately available. Lawmakers reached a tentative deal on the budget Wednesday.

Late in the day Thursday, lawmakers scheduled a public vote for 8 a.m. Friday on the yet-to-be-released budget bill, as well as on a related tax bill. It didn't appear as if the bill would get a public hearing.

At this point, Robinson said, there's not really enough time to make changes to the plan based on additional public input.

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Pierce County Councilman Derek Young, D-Gig Harbor, said the speed and secrecy surrounding the Legislature's budget process would be unacceptable or illegal for almost any other government in the state. The Legislature has exempted itself from requirements of the state's Open Public Meetings Act, and doesn't abide by the state's Public Records Act, either.

Young said he's worried the lack of public scrutiny could mean the budget passes with errors or other problems that could plague local governments later on.

"It's really common for us to sit there and say, 'Oh, here's a big glaring error that they passed in this thing, with local repercussions,'" Young said. "And we're going to have to deal with the problem."

House Republican Leader Dan Kristiansen, R-Snohomish, said he would have preferred to have more transparency with this year's budget process, "but the time line has really choked us down to a limited amount of time."

Kristiansen said it is possible that the state's 295 school districts won't be able to review all the details about how the state budget would affect them until late Thursday or early Friday. The education plan included in the budget raises the statewide property tax, while reducing what school districts can raise through their local property-tax levies.

Lawmakers have been working on that in response to a 2012 state Supreme Court ruling that said the state wasn't meeting its duty to fully fund public schools. In the McCleary case, the high court has said lawmakers must come up with a school-funding solution by the time they adjourn this year.

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House Minority Leader Dan Kristiansen, R-Snohomish

Kristiansen said he's confident the Legislature would pass the budget and get it signed by the governor in time to avert a government shutdown.

"We'll make the deadline, I'm sure of that," he said. "The question is, how much daylight to all these specific school districts are they going to have to look at it, to be able to chime in on this?"

While lawmakers were confident a large government shutdown would be avoided, legislators Thursday still were negotiating the capital budget, which pays for school construction and other projects around the state.

If a capital budget isn't passed by midnight Friday, some state workers would be temporarily laid off. The Office of Financial Management still was trying to get an estimate for how many workers would be affected, but it wouldn't be nearly as many as if the operating budget isn't passed.

Negotiations were being held up in part by a battle over a bill regarding water rights and the use of domestic wells the GOP has championed.

Washington State Parks also said Thursday it had been planning to close parks on Friday, ahead of the midnight deadline, because shutting down can be a lengthy process.

In that scenario rangers would have evacuated campers from the park Friday morning.

Inslee intervened, however, asking the agency to stay open on Friday since lawmakers are confident a budget would be passed before a shutdown.

Reporters Walker Orenstein and Zoe Saylor contributed to this report

Melissa Santos: 360-357-0209, @melissasantos1



Democratic state Rep. June Robinson, standing, talks with fellow Democratic budget negotiators, Reps. Kristine Lytton and Timm Ormsby, seated right, and staff Thursday in the House wings before heading into a meeting to brief fellow lawmakers on the details of a state budget deal. A new two-year budget must be signed into law by midnight Friday in order to avoid a partial state government shutdown. Rachel La Corte AP

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