



Budget holdup

Full-time status slows lawmakers' performance

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Michigan lawmakers continue to make a case for a part-time Legislature by lollygagging on writing next year's budget, one of the most important tasks state government has faced in decades, because these politicians have too much time on their hands.

Is there much doubt that they could craft a fiscal 2008 spending plan - which ultimately will require tough votes on taxes, government reforms and spending cuts - in two weeks, if this was the allotted time to do the job? Instead, they will spend the rest of the summer and early fall posturing and plotting for political advantage, until the calendar demands a deal get done.

Senate Majority Leader Mike Bishop, R-Rochester, signaled a commitment to this 11th-hour strategy by noting that though he'd like to finish the new budget as quickly as possible, the current fiscal year doesn't end until Sept. 30.

Whom is he kidding? Tell this to the public universities, schools districts, local governments and community health programs that began new fiscal years July 1 completely ignorant about their level of state support. Is it any wonder that the campuses have been raising their tuitions by nearly double-digit amounts - sometimes higher - unfairly shifting more of the burden of educating Michigan's future work force to financially strapped families?

Unfortunately, those tuition increases may only ease the pressure on lawmakers to pass a tax increase to help remedy a \$1.6-billion shortfall in next year's budget. It's a break they don't deserve, as their borrowing and spending - papered over with accounting gimmicks and other one-time devices - have protected them from the hard decisions for too long.

Even now, with the financial facts needed to act fully in view, lawmakers would prefer to debate and delay, putting off the inevitable to advance partisan interests and self-preservation. Republicans, for their part, want to retain their anti-tax posture until the last minute, hence Bishop's hinting of foot-dragging in the GOP-controlled Senate. Over in the Democratic-run House, there may be a greater urgency to get serious, but nonetheless Speaker Andy Dillon's Labor Day deadline for finalizing the budget suggests a slow pace is in store there, too.

It's a strategy of brinkmanship, not statesmanship, made all the more necessary because a full-time Legislature has so many days to kill. It amounts to a burden as politics by necessity must eat up the calendar until the timing for a budget accord becomes optimal.

Regrettably, that moment isn't close, though most lawmakers surely have all the information to decide on a course and may privately have done so.

No wonder there is talk of making the Michigan Legislature part-time, like those in most other states, where politicians perform their duties in a more compressed period because of fixed schedules, as well as

their non-lawmaking responsibilities.

By contrast, Michigan legislators will fill up the next several weeks discussing and arguing about the obvious, from the size of next year's deficit to the tax increase and spending cuts required to fix it. Miraculously, they'll fashion a deal at the last minute, as if some special wisdom or courage was acquired, when in truth the work will have gotten done merely because there was no time to do anything else.

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