

Session achieves little but bitterness

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BATON ROUGE- The politicians involved in Louisiana's regular legislative session probably want to erase their memories of the largely do-nothing affair.

The two-month gathering has the ugly distinction of being the first session to end without a budget in 17 years, and it collapsed in such meltdown in the final hours that few are likely to forget the ruckus anytime soon.

Many of the major pieces of Gov. John Bel Edwards' legislative agenda wound up on the cutting room floor, as his relationship with House Republican leaders worsened. Lawmakers also didn't have many shining moments to celebrate, getting bogged down in divisive disputes over the naming of a Louisiana boarding school and the removal of Confederate monuments.

Even as Louisiana careens toward a "fiscal cliff" that is only a year away, lawmakers accomplished nothing to end Louisiana's boom-and-bust budgeting cycles or address a looming more than \$1 billion budget gap in mid-2018. They didn't restructure tax laws that are derided by the right and left as unnecessarily complex, riddled with loopholes and often unfair.

And the Democratic governor and majority-Republican Legislature didn't even complete the must-pass items in the regular session: a state operating budget and construction financing plans for the financial year that begins July 1. Lawmakers have now gaveled into a special session to complete those tasks. The last time such a failure happened was in 2000.

The political and philosophical divides are so deep that gridlock is becoming more prevalent.

The House, the Senate and the governor couldn't come to terms on how much money to spend next year. A majority of House Republicans, led by Speaker Taylor Barras and Appropriations Chairman Cameron Henry, want to spend less than the full income forecast, in the hopes of avoiding midyear budget cuts if the forecast comes up short.

The Senate, the governor and House Democrats want to spend all the dollars available, saying otherwise they'd have to make unnecessary cuts to colleges and public services. By the final day of the regular session, a few House Republicans had drifted to their side, seeming to suggest that could have been enough to pass the Senate plan if Barras and Henry hadn't procedurally blocked such a vote. House Republican leaders are talking about their conservative philosophy, positioning themselves as the principled ones fighting for pared-down state spending. Barras said Senate leaders and Edwards "wouldn't budge" in negotiations, making it impossible to find common ground. "I know members wanted to vote on a budget. I certainly did as well, but it had to be one that made sense," Barras said.

Henry blamed the governor. "He seems to be one of the few governors that uses the threat of special sessions to try to move his agenda rather than working with the legislators who vote on it," Henry said.

Senate leaders and Edwards are positioning themselves as the responsible grown-ups in the debate, describing the House GOP as obstructionist partisans. Edwards described the House, where he once served, as "dysfunctional" and said some GOP lawmakers there should "grow up."

"Nobody on either side of the spectrum can believe that what we witnessed (Thursday) was a functioning House of Representatives that is seriously, collectively trying to do the people's business," the governor said.

Both Edwards and Republican Senate President John Alario said it appeared that some Republicans in the House are determined not to give any victories to the governor.

"If their idea is simply just to hurt the governor, it's a big mistake because all they're doing is hurting the people of this state," Alario said.

Everyone's pointing fingers.

To most Louisiana citizens, it seems unlikely much of that posturing will matter. Those who don't closely follow the political maneuvering at the state capitol simply will know the governor and lawmakers didn't get their jobs done and now it's going to cost taxpayers \$50,000 to \$60,000 a day for a special session — the fourth special session since February 2016.

Plus, even if the House, Senate and governor can get a budget

agreement done before this latest special session ends June 19, another special session looms to deal with the long-term problems they didn't fix in the regular session.