

Financial issues linger in Louisiana session's final days

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BATON ROUGE - Only days remain in Louisiana's lawmaking session, with legislators negotiating on a final budget deal, the House sitting on a construction financing plan and pieces of a criminal justice revamp starting to reach the governor's desk.

The two-month legislative session must end by Thursday. As usual, some major items remain unsettled until the last days, including bills that enact the spending plans for the financial year that begins July 1.

As a precaution, Gov. John Bel Edwards has called a special session to begin 30 minutes after the regular session ends Thursday, in case lawmakers haven't reached a budget agreement. Nearly all tax bills have been shelved, with the House and Senate unable to find consensus on anything to do with taxes paid or tax breaks.

Lawmakers spent much of Monday wrapping up their work on issues unrelated to the state's budget.

The Senate haggled over how to rework the laws governing the state dentistry board, after a critical audit. The House deviated into a discussion prompted by Republican Rep. Valarie Hodges about whether Louisiana should ban investments in countries that boycott Israel, a debate that grew heated after Democratic Rep. Barbara Norton chastised Hodges for spending too much time on federal issues, rather than Louisiana's finances.

The bill with Hodges' pro-Israel language passed, but only after some tense exchanges.

"I am sick of you coming to the microphone talking about other countries," Norton said. "Would you please stop bringing Israel and other countries here?"

Hodges replied: "I'm doing this for the state of Louisiana. My constituents don't want Louisiana to invest in terrorism."

The House also spent part of the afternoon debating whether to rename a Louisiana boarding school for gifted students after a former state lawmaker.

Edwards made strides in his effort to rewrite Louisiana's criminal justice laws, aimed at reducing incarceration rates and lessening the likelihood that people exiting prison will reoffend. Senators gave final passage to some of the measures, sending others back to the House for consideration of changes.

Behind closed doors, House lawmakers were deciding whether they would support or reject the Senate version of next year's nearly \$29 billion state operating budget.

The House spending plan sought to leave \$206 million unspent in the financial year that begins July 1, even though the state income forecast predicts the dollars will be available. Senators instead are proposing to spend all the money. House GOP leaders say they want to give the state a cushion against their expectations the forecast is too optimistic. Senators said leaving money on the table would cause damaging cuts. Republican House members also object to the Senate's inclusion of pay raises for 38,000 state workers and other changes.

Senate President John Alario said the chamber is "very comfortable" with the spending plans it passed.

"We think we were very responsible," the Republican leader from Westwego said.