

Edwards: Time to explore to 'fiscal cliff' options

BY ELIZABETH CRISP

Gov. John Bel Edwards is urging state House Speaker Taylor Barras to form a bipartisan working group to come up with options for addressing the more than \$1 billion budget shortfall the state faces next year.

"It's time for constructive dialogue," Edwards wrote in a letter to Barras that the Governor's Office also distributed to reporters.

Barras, R-New Iberia, is out of state and could not be reached for comment.

Legislators last year approved a temporary 1-cent sales tax hike to shore up the state's finances. It's scheduled to expire in July 2018.

A task force developed a series of recommendations for creating structural stability in the budget beyond the sales tax increase, but no major revenue measure was approved when the Legislature met earlier this year, largely because of pushback in the Republican controlled House.

Edwards, a Democrat, said in his letter to Barras that "the Legislature, particularly the House of Representatives, has been unwilling to discuss solutions" and said he's "hesitant" to call a special session without input from House leadership.

"At a cost of roughly \$60,000 per day, it would be irresponsible to make Louisiana's taxpayers foot the bill for another special session without a firm commitment to act from the House," Edwards wrote.

Lawmakers cannot take up major revenue measures in the regular session next year because they can be debated only in the regularly scheduled sessions in odd-numbered years.

Edwards has had a particularly fractious relationship with the House Republican leaders since taking office in January 2016. In the House's first official action of the new term, the GOP majority shirked the unusual tradition of Louisiana governors selecting which member will lead the chamber - opting to name little-known Barras to the post, instead of Edwards' Democratic preference, Rep. Walt Leger III, of New Orleans.

Over the four special sessions and two regular sessions in the months

since, House Republicans have consistently positioned themselves at odds with Edwards. A business tax Edwards recommended earlier this year never gained enough traction for even a committee vote in the House.

House Republican leaders have repeatedly pushed for deeper cuts to the state budget; a move Barras has said was deliberate to decrease the size of the shortfall before taking up taxes. During the most recent legislative session, they unsuccessfully pushed for the state to spend about \$200 million less this year than was available in the budget as an attempt to cut the size of the looming cliff - a move Edwards and the Senate rejected.

Barras has floated the idea of extending half of the sales tax hike - keeping half a penny of the increase while letting the other half expire - as an option.

"With everyone engaged, we should be able to quickly determine if a special session will be productive," Edwards wrote in his letter to Barras.