

House clears bill slashing spending

2018 LEGISLATURE BUDGET

BY ELIZABETH CRISP

The Louisiana House has endorsed a spending plan for the coming year that critics, including Gov. John Bel Edwards, say would have a catastrophic effect on the state's health and economy, with deep cuts to services for poor, disabled and elderly people.

The \$27 billion budget proposal, which narrowly passed through the GOP-controlled House in a 55-47 vote Thursday, now heads to the Senate for vetting, but it's unclear what happens to it from here.

"The Senate cannot fix this budget. It is short too much revenue," Edwards, a Democrat, said of the House proposal.

The state is facing about a \$650 million fiscal cliff when temporary tax measures expire June 30. Edwards has repeatedly urged lawmakers to partially extend expiring taxes or come up with new sources of revenue to plug the hole and prevent deep cuts to state programs, but a special session earlier this year collapsed after the House reached an impasse on revenue proposals.

Edwards wants the Legislature to wrap up its regular session early so lawmakers can meet in another special session to try to close the gap.

"We need a special session to maintain more of the revenue that's falling off the table," he said. "The sooner the better."

But House Republican leaders defended their version of House Bill 1 as a start to the larger budget process.

"We're not done yet," House Appropriations Committee Chairman Cameron Henry, R-Metairie, said after a debate that stretched on for more than five hours. "This is one step in the process."

Henry said legislators have an obligation to pass a budget and suggested that the proposal would show where the gaps are.

"Everybody would like to have more money available to them," he said. "We have to live within our means."

The House budget plan would nearly defund the state's safety net

hospitals, a move that the Louisiana Department of Health predicts would shutter hospitals in New Orleans, Shreveport, Monroe, Lafayette and Bogalusa.

It also funds only 80 percent of the money needed for the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students, which would lead to cuts to scholarships for college students, and it would drastically reduce funding for medical education programs in the state, potentially leaving Louisiana with no functioning medical schools.

Additionally, it would eliminate funding for thousands of nursing home residents.

House Democratic Caucus Chairman Robert Johnson, of Marksville, said even if the cuts aren't final, they send a scary message that the state is willing to "throw the elderly out of nursing homes (and) deny the sick treatment."

"We are constitutionally obligated to pass a budget, but we are not constitutionally obligated to pass this one. And shame on us if we do," Johnson said.

Some had questioned whether the House Republican leadership could muster the 53 votes needed to send a budget with deep cuts out of the chamber, though House Speaker Taylor Barras had expressed his confidence in it last week.

"We came into this session with a clear directive from taxpayers not to spend more money than we have," said House GOP caucus Chairman Lance Harris, of Alexandria.

"This is what a responsible budget looks like - dealing with the actual figures, the actual money that's available to the state today. The state cannot spend money that it doesn't have."

House Republicans argue that their effort to block action in the special session was savvy, as Edwards' initial projections for how much revenue the state would need was excessive. The size of the fiscal cliff has shrunk since the first special session.

"The number is getting smaller and smaller," Henry said.

House leaders said they are anxious to see how the Senate responds to the bill they passed.

The Senate Finance Committee is scheduled to meet Sunday - its third

Sunday hearing since the session started last month - to continue budget hearings.

It remains to be seen whether enough senators will agree to advance a budget, but Edwards said he doesn't think many would relish the thought of cosigning cuts in the House proposal.

"I don't need to tell the senators how inadequate this bill is; they know that," Edwards said.

Many lawmakers agree with Edwards that another special session is needed to replace some of the revenue the state will lose when temporary tax measures expire June 30. During the floor debate on the budget, Henry and Harris both indicated they believe another special session should be held.

Harris said after the House adjourned that the GOP delegation has not taken a position on a special session as a body, but individual members have their own opinions.

"We want to see this (budget) go through, then we will take it up," he said. "While not perfect - there is still a lot of work to do - we passed a budget, and it's on its way to the Senate to finish work on the budget using the funds that we have today."

Henry downplayed suggestions that the session should end early to allow a special session to be held earlier, noting that the 105-member House still has bills on other issues to tackle.

Voting for state budget proposal (55):

Speaker Barras and Reps. Abraham, Abramson, Amedee, Bacala, Bagley, Berthelot, Bishop, Carmody, S. Carter, Coussan, Crews, Davis, DeVillier, Dwight, Edmonds, Emerson, Falconer, Foil, Garofalo, Guinn, L. Harris, Hazel, Henry, Hensgens, Hilferty, Hodges, Hoffmann, Hollis, Horton, Howard, Huval, N. Landry, Leopold, Mack, Magee, McFarland, Miguez, G. Miller, Jay Morris, Jim Morris, Muscarello, Pearson, Pugh, Pylant, Richard, Schexnayder, Seabaugh, Simon, Stagni, Stefanski, Talbot, Thomas, Wright and Zeringue.

Voting against HB1 (47): Reps. Anders, Armes, Bagneris, Billiot, Bouie, Brass, C. Brown, T. Brown, G. Carter, R. Carter, Chaney, Connick, Cox, Danahay, Duplessis, Franklin, Gaines, Gisclair, Glover, Hall, J. Harris, Havard, Hunter, Ivey, Jackson, James, Jefferson, Jenkins, Johnson, Jones, Jordan, T. Landry, LeBas, Leger, Lyons, Marcelle, Marino, D. Miller, Norton, Pierre, Pope, Reynolds, Shadoin,

Smith, Stokes, Thibaut and White.

Not voting (3): Reps. Carpenter, Cromer and Hill.