

Louisiana lawmakers debate budget few want enacted

Melinda Deslatte

ASSOCIATED PRESS

BATON ROUGE – Republican lawmakers in the Louisiana House passed a budget proposal that few appear to actually like because of the cuts it contains. Senate leaders don't seem inclined to pass it. And the governor's not interested in signing the spending plan if it reaches his desk.

Uncertainty clouds the budget debate as the state edges closer to the financial year that begins July 1. A special session on taxes is expected, but it's not clear whether that will raise any additional money to stave off the cuts that are raising objections.

In the crosshairs – and anxiously sitting through the waiting game – are hundreds of thousands of people who rely on state aid: students whose college tuition is paid through the TOPS program, nursing home residents, parents of disabled children and the poor who rely on the safety-net network of hospitals.

Louisiana's expected to take in \$648 million less in general state tax dollars next year than the state received this year.

The problem is a self-inflicted one. Lawmakers passed temporary taxes in 2015 and 2016 to patch budget holes, and now those taxes – nearly \$1.4 billion of them – are expiring on July 1. Other rising tax collections are offsetting part, but not all, of the gap.

Gov. John Bel Edwards wants lawmakers to replace some of the expiring taxes, but a special session earlier this year ended in stalemate. The Democratic governor wants another special session, with a final budget crafted then.

Lawmakers disagree on whether they should stall a budget until that special session, particularly when no one's reached a tax deal, even in concept.

A \$27 billion state operating budget scraped through the House on Thursday with only two votes to spare, on a nearly party-line vote of Republican support. One Democrat backed the spending plan and eight Republicans defected in opposition.

The proposal would cut public safety programs, cover only 80 percent

of tuition costs through TOPS and steeply slash financing for health care services. House GOP leaders called it a “responsible budget,” but that support came with a caveat.

They weren’t necessarily championing cuts to TOPS or reductions that health leaders have warned could devastate services. Instead, they were patting themselves on the back for spending only the dollars available and meeting the requirement of crafting a balanced budget.

“We have to live within our means,” said Appropriations Chairman Cameron Henry, the Metairie Republican who shepherds the budget through the House.

Even Republicans who voted for the proposal talked of holding their nose while they pushed the button. But they said lawmakers should pass a budget so they can pinpoint gaps they want to fill ahead of a special session.

“No one likes the budget. But what it’s going to do is identify the areas that we are short so people around the state can see that,” said Rep. Mark Abraham, a Lake Charles Republican.

Democrats who sought to stymie the budget bill called it cruel.

“You vote today to pass this budget bill out and we don’t raise the revenue, you voted for the cuts,” House Democratic leader Robert Johnson, of Marksville, told his colleagues Thursday.

“You voted to shut down hospitals, throw the elderly out of nursing homes, deny the sick treatment and, yes, break that promise to students all across Louisiana that they’re not going to go to school on a TOPS scholarship,” he said. Henry downplayed the cuts’ impact, describing the overall reduction as about 5 percent of spending: “We’ll never get a perfect budget. Someone will always need more.”

Edwards trashed the proposal and said simply: “The Senate cannot fix this.”

Just how the Senate will handle this budget is unclear.

Senate President John Alario doesn’t like the way the spending plan looks now and supports replacement taxes to fill gaps. The Republican didn’t commit to whether he’ll push to advance the budget during the regular session.

“Whether we will pass the budget, I don’t know,” said Finance Chairman Eric LaFleur, the Ville Platte Democrat who handles the budget in the

Senate. "The budget is not acceptable the way it is to anyone."