

LEGISLATURE: EXPECT GRIDLOCK

Despite governor's plea for bipartisanship, it will be tough to get action this session

GREG HILBURN USA TODAY NETWORK

BATON ROUGE — Many Louisiana lawmakers forecast two months of gridlock here Monday even as Gov. John Bel Edwards implored them to work together and with him to stabilize the budget with new taxes, implement justice reforms, raise the minimum wage and pass equal pay legislation.

On that, at least, there was bipartisan agreement.

"I don't believe we could get 70 votes to agree it's Monday," said Rep. Robby Carter, D-Greensburg, referring to the two-thirds majority needed to pass new taxes in the Republican-led House.

Acadiana lawmaker Rep. Stuart Bishop, R-Lafayette: "There's going to be a ton of gridlock. There are a lot of things coming out of the governor's office that are dead on arrival."

But the Democratic governor cautioned against such a divide.

"We still have a long road ahead of us, and the path to success must be driven by putting the people of Louisiana first and to do that, we must work together," Edwards said in his address to lawmakers to begin the 60-day legislative session Monday.

"There is simply no other way to make Louisiana the state we all know that it can be. I refuse to allow governing the state of Louisiana to look anything like what's going on in Washington. It's not working for them, and it will not work for us.

"There is too much at stake for us to let partisanship get in the way and none of us should tolerate it." But even one of the governor's most fierce allies, House Democratic Caucus Chairman Gene Reynolds of Minden, is skeptical lawmakers can agree on major reforms, whether it be taxes to close budget shortfalls or justice reforms that would reduce Louisiana's prison population.

"This session, in one word, will be tough, and the toughest part will be getting 70 votes," Reynolds said. "It's also going to be tense."

But House Republican Caucus Chairman Lance Harris of Alexandria believes success can be achieved, not by raising taxes or the minimum

wage, but by reducing the size of government.

Harris said Republicans in the House will insist on a standstill budget.

“Once we determine how much money we have to spend then we can decide what revenue we might need, if any,” Harris said. “We need to shrink government before we grow taxes.”

One of Edwards’ key proposals to offset a potential \$1.3 billion shortfall next year when a temporary 1-cent sales tax expires is a corporate sales tax on businesses, which he calls a Commercial Activity Tax, that has already been panned by business groups. The governor has said the proposed CAT tax would ensure businesses “pay their fair share,” noting many large business pay no corporate income tax. Republican lawmakers have already dug in against the tax — “We have to stop attacking businesses,” Bishop said — and Democrats don’t believe the proposal has legs. “I’m afraid not,” Reynolds said. Edwards warned if lawmakers do nothing to raise revenue to replace the expiring penny in this session he will call what would be his fourth special session to address the issue. The governor said if his entire tax package became law 90 percent of Louisianians would pay fewer taxes. “This is the big moment,” Edwards said. “The structural deficits have gone on for far too long. The resistance to doing what is right and necessary to fix this problem once and for all is no longer acceptable.

“Criticism is only as valuable as the input and action that follows it, but we have seen very little constructive input and no constructive action. That’s just not helpful.”