

Pressure brings lawmaker to tears

Session-saving deal now in tatters; gridlock stays

Greg Hilburn Monroe News-Star USA TODAY NETWORK

Two anti-tax Republicans on the House Ways & Means Committee said they will block any effort to move an income tax bill Sunday despite enormous pressure from leadership that left one member in tears and a tentative deal in tatters.

State Rep. Dodie Horton, R-Haughton, said "tears were streaming down my face" when she left a meeting with Speaker Taylor Barras, R-New Iberia, Thursday night in which he asked her to support the income tax bill and a sales tax bill in committee. Horton said she considered not returning for Sunday's Ways and Means and Health and Welfare committee meetings, but regained her resolve shortly after her meeting with Barras.

"It was very emotional," she said. "But this isn't in my DNA to allow something to pass that I know is wrong without voting against it, and I don't think it's right to 'take a walk,' " Horton said, referring to the practice of stepping away rather than voting.

Rep. Alan Seabaugh, R-Shreveport, said he also heard a deal had been struck, "but I'm not part of it."

"I'm going to object (to the income tax bill) and make people vote and note those who take a walk," Seabaugh said. "There's no way I'm letting that bill out without a vote, and anybody that does vote for it is likely to find themselves voted out in the next election."

House Democratic Caucus Chairman Gene Reynolds of Minden said he was surprised to hear of Horton's and Seabaugh's intentions. "(Thursday night) we had a loose deal to let those bills out to the floor," Reynolds said. "If what you're telling me is the case then maybe we don't. It's disappointing because we worked on this for hours and days."

USA Today Network has reached out to Barras for comment.

The deal, according to those involved, was to allow Rep. Walt Leger's House Bill 8 and Rep. Stephen Dwight's House Bill 23 out of committee to be debated by the full House.

House Bill 8 would reduce the amount of federal itemized deductions

Louisiana taxpayers could take on their state returns and raise about \$100 million, while House Bill 23 would create a new permanent quarter-cent sales tax (\$220 million) and remove some sales tax exemptions (\$80 million).

Democrats and members of the Black Caucus have said they won't support the sales tax without the income tax bill also coming out of committee.

In return, Democrats and Black Caucus members would allow two Medicaid reform bills (one to tighten eligibility and a second imposing work requirements) to clear the Health & Welfare Committee Sunday.

Two Medicaid co-pay bills by Rep. Jack McFarland, R-Winnfield, would be shelved for this session as part of the deal to win support for the other Medicaid bills.

Both Horton and Seabaugh said they are considering letting the sales tax bill clear the committee without objecting, but will dig in on the income tax bill.

But Democrats and Black Caucus members said one won't move without the other, leaving the legislation in gridlock.

"I left (the Capitol Thursday night) in a better place thinking we had come to a resolution," said Rep. Ted James, D-Baton Rouge, vice chairman of the Black Caucus. "But I'm not moving one instrument without the other. We need both of them on the floor."

Gov. John Bel Edwards called lawmakers into the 17-day special session Monday asking them to pass about \$1 billion in new permanent taxes to replace a portion of the more than \$1.3 billion in temporary taxes that expire June 30.

The governor said if nothing is done there will be a \$994 million shortfall in next year's budget that would force dramatic cuts to the popular scholarship program TOPS, health care and higher education.

But Seabaugh said once the new federal tax laws benefiting Louisiana are factored into the revenue (\$302 million) as well as rising revenue from oil prices and a surplus, the shortfall is closer to \$350 million than \$1 billion.

"We can cut that without anyone noticing," he said.

Reynolds and James both said the deal only covered the bills clearing

the committees, not their fate on the House floor.

“We have to decide whether or not we’re going to let a handful of people decide the fate of the state or 105 members,” Reynolds said.

“The entire body deserves to hear the bills. Then if they don’t like them they can vote no until the cows come home.”