

Posted on Thu, Jul 5, 2007

## Editorial: It's time to get serious in budget standoff

### **Our view**

In the land of perpetually budget-challenged Pennsylvania, things are about to get serious.

Let's review: After months of talking about a new era of open government and other reforms in Harrisburg, the July 1 budget deadline came – and went – just as it usually does.

On one side sits Democratic Gov. Ed Rendell, who is insisting that the Legislature consider all his new proposals, including lots of new money for transit, early-childhood education, health care, and new energy programs.

On the other is Senate Republicans, with our own Sen. Dominic Pileggi, R-9 of Chester, sitting in the catbird seat as the new majority leader. The Republicans don't have much appetite for the cost of many of Rendell's proposals, which they say will result in some serious increased spending. That translates into tax hikes.

They want to deal with the spending blueprint first, get it out of the way, then deal with some of the governor's new proposals. Rendell isn't buying.

And here they sit. Right where they've been since cruising through the deadline last weekend.

After taking a day off for the Independence Day holiday, legislators were back at it in Harrisburg Thursday in hopes of reaching some kind of an accord.

It won't come a minute too soon.

Operating without a budget is not without its consequences.

Some 26,000 so-called "non-essential" state workers could find that out the hard way come Monday if a spending plan continues to elude lawmakers. They would be laid off. That's because without a budget in place, the state technically no longer has the ability to spend money. That includes paying its workers.

And that's not all. State park camp sites would be shuttered. At the peak of the summer vacation period. Those teens who can't wait to get their driver's license permit or take their driving test? Sorry, those offices also would be closed. State museums and historic sites would close their doors.

Oh, and one other thing. Those glorious new slot-machine meccas, including Harrah's Chester Casino and Racetrack? They fall under the auspices of the state Gaming Control Board. They also would go dark, starting Monday morning.

We actually heard much over the past couple of months about one of the key sticking points, a new funding stream for mass transit. Both the governor and the Philadelphia delegation made it clear they would not consider any budget plan that did not address new funding for the state's roads, bridges and transit systems. You can read that as SEPTA.

For the most part, that has been accomplished. Both the House and Senate have signed off on a \$700 million transportation funding plan that would be bankrolled in large part by placing tolls on I-80 and leaning on local municipalities to pick up more of the cost. That issue has stuck in the craw of Delco's Republican House delegation, as well as some county officials, who fear they may be on the hook for some local tax hikes to cover the cost.

What hasn't gotten nearly the attention are two other programs near and dear to the governor's heart. Rendell, who will not be running for re-election, is seeking huge increases in spending in the areas of early childhood education and a new energy strategy for the state.

Rendell is seeking another \$100 million to expand several early childhood initiatives, including pre-kindergarten services and full-day kindergarten programs. The program breaks down to \$75 million for pre-kindergarten programs involving some 11,000 public elementary school students, as well as Head Start programs and the state's innovative Pre-K Counts program.

Pennsylvania has traditionally lagged in spending in these areas, instead preferring to leave those decisions to be made at the local level.

Rendell correctly is banking on studies that show the value of the programs, especially in terms of keeping kids out of trouble later in life.

Another \$25 million would be used to boost full-day kindergarten programs and get more laptop computers into classrooms.

Then there's the matter of energy. Rendell envisions setting up an \$850 million fund, bankrolled by a surcharge on electric bills, to be used to promote renewable energy, push conservation and develop more alternative fuel sources.

Republicans look at the surcharge and read that as new taxes. Delco Democrats rallied in favor of the proposal on the steps of the County Courthouse Thursday morning.

Both these programs deserve to be implemented. For too long Pennsylvania has lagged behind when it comes to early childhood education spending, as well as in development of a more realistic energy plan.

However, talking about them is one thing. Paying for them, as Republicans would no doubt remind us, is another altogether.

The two sides spent much of yesterday seeking a solution.

Rendell is not likely to blink in terms of his demand that all of his programs be considered, instead of stripping out the most expensive – and controversial – proposals.

Nobody wants to see a state shutdown. It would smudge what to this point has been an impressive move toward a more responsive, more open government. Pileggi has been in the forefront of that movement. Now he and Rendell are staring down the barrel of a state meltdown.

Ironically, one of the things that has been banned is the longtime custom in Harrisburg of working into the wee hours of the morning to hammer out deals on legislation, including the state budget. Sessions now are mandated to end each night at 11 p.m.

This might be an instance where they might want to waive that rule.

Roll up your sleeves, ladies and gentlemen. Too much is at stake in this showdown.