

Budget showdown looms between House and Senate

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SPRINGFIELD -- Illinois House Democrats approved their own version of a new state budget Wednesday, setting up a showdown with the Senate over how much to spend as the legislature heads into its final scheduled day of the spring session.

Republican representatives, still fuming over the way pension reform legislation was handled a day earlier, refused Thursday to vote for most of the budget, even though GOP negotiators had worked for weeks with Democrats to fashion a budget compromise that would fit within the spending restrictions the House imposed on itself earlier this spring.

House Minority Leader Tom Cross, R-Oswego, also accused Democrats of adding money to the budget after they learned that Republicans would not support it.

“There’s \$50 million more than when we were working with you,” Cross said. “Fifty million is a lot of money. You can’t control yourselves. That’s what happens when you are left to your own devices.”

Democrats said they added \$50 million to general state aid to schools. With the addition, general state aid would drop by \$161 million under the House budget, instead of \$211 million.

The exchange set off heated debate about which party wanted what items in the budget.

Rep. Fred Crespo, D-Hoffman Estates, said Republicans told him they would not support a budget that did not keep all state facilities open.

“We found the money. Isn’t that something?” Crespo said.

Although many of those facilities are in Republican districts, they still voted against the budget.

The budget does contain money to keep open the Jacksonville Developmental Center and other state mental health facilities, prisons and youth centers.

However, Rep. Jim Watson, R-Jacksonville, said the budget is structured so that Gov. Pat Quinn can still close facilities. Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, chairman of the House Human Services Appropriations Committee, agreed Quinn will have the last word.

“Whether or not the governor intends on actually spending that money, that’s a policy decision, not so much a budget decision,” she said.

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees praised the House budget for keeping facilities open, but also warned that it contains “cuts that concern us in several areas.”

Madigan said that the House budget is \$4 million below the spending caps approved on a bipartisan vote earlier this year.

However, that sets the House budget in conflict with a spending plan approved earlier by the Senate, which calls for spending substantially more than the House, particularly on education. The Senate plan keeps education spending the same as this year.

The chambers will have to work out their differences today if they want to avoid putting the session into overtime. After Thursday, it will take a supermajority vote in the General Assembly to pass a budget. That brings Republicans into play, and Senate GOPers have said they want to see even deeper budget cuts.

Staff writer David Thomas contributed to this report. Doug Finke can be reached at (217) 788-1527.