Budget sent to Senate floor
Panel approves House version

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The Louisiana Legislature is potentially one step away from having a final budget plan, after a breakdown between the House and Senate sent lawmakers into a special session to finish negotiations.

The Senate Finance Committee on Thursday approved the House version of the budget without amending it, sending it to the full Senate to vote on Friday. If no changes are made on the floor, then the deal is sealed.

If it’s amended, it would have to go back to the House one more time, where its fate grows less certain.

That important factor wasn’t lost on some committee members Thursday.

“Any amendment would jeopardize the process,” said Senate Finance Committee Chairman Eric LaFleur, a Ville Platte Democrat who joked that his son’s baseball team is playing in a tournament next week so he doesn’t want another special session.

The current special session must end or before Monday.

The latest budget plan would reduce all of the nearly $29 billion available for the budget that begins July 1, but it also would direct state agencies to save $60 million in case the state faces a mid-year deficit.

Gov. John Bel Edwards’ administration, which supports the plan, would have to provide legislative budget leaders with monthly updates on the deficit avoidance plan.

House Republican leaders had initially pushed for the state to not spend $206 million that is projected to be available in the coming year so that there would be a “cushion” if the state faces another mid-year deficit, as it has repeatedly faced in recent years.

Thirteen House Republicans on Wednesday spurned the chamber’s leadership in joining Democrats to advance the scaled-back proposal supported by Edwards and the Senate.

Both the House and Senate are majority Republican, but the House is more conservative, and the Senate tends to be more closely aligned with Edwards, a Democrat.

Commissioner of Administration Jay Dardar and told Finance Committee members Thursday the effort to hold back some of the dollars through administrative channels, rather than not appropriating them, made more sense.

“We shouldn’t leave them out in the netherworld,” he said.

He said the proposal is “essentially the same thing” that the Edwards administration did last year when it urged departments to plan to scale back spending so that they would have money available if cuts are needed to shore up a mid-year shortfall.

But some of the budget panel’s members said they wished the amount the state plans to save was higher and that there were tighter controls on the money that has been set aside.

“It’s not nearly as much as I would like, personally,” said Sen. Sharon Hewitt, R-Slidell.