Louisiana House approves budget compromise bill

Spending plan expected to have support in Senate

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With a majority of Louisiana's GOP-controlled House voting against the chamber's conservative leaders, the Legislature appears close to approving a budget that will use all of the $29 billion expected to be available in the coming year.

The House voted 56-44 on Wednesday approving a budget after nearly four hours of debate that centered on just how much the state should spend after it has consistently failed to meet budget projections in recent years. The proposal now heads to the Senate, where leaders have already expressed support. Senate Finance Committee Chairman Eric LaFleur, D-Ville Platte, said his committee will hear the proposal on Thursday.

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It's possible the upper chamber could make no changes, which would speed up the process and prevent a reversal in the House. The latest version has also support of Gov. John Bel Edwards, a Democrat.

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"While it still imposes cuts across state government, it does so in a responsible way that adequately funds our needs without negatively impacting the most vulnerable among us," Edwards said in a statement.

Both the House and Senate are majority Republican, but the House is generally more conservative while the Senate is more closely aligned with Edwards.

The latest budget proposal would fully fund the popular Taylor Opportunity Program for Students; implement a plan for pay raises for 38,000 state employees; and provide funding for the Bunkie juvenile facility to open.

While it cuts health care spending, the latest version doesn't cut higher education, prisons or social services as steeply as the House's initial plan had proposed.

But unlike traditional budget debates that focus on shifting dollars between programs and priorities, the most contested issue in this year has been whether the state should budget all the money it expects to have.

On paper, the latest budget agreement is a big win for the Senate, House Democrats and Edwards, who had resisted a push from House Republican leaders who wanted to leave several million dollars unspent as a symbol of their commitment to cutting spending and a "cushion" in case the state faces another midyear budget deficit.

Instead, the latest bill instructs state agencies to save $60 million in the coming year through a "deficit avoidance plan."

"I think it's a good, fair compromise," said Senate President John Alario, R-Westwego.

It's similar to a proposal that the Senate offered the House earlier in the final hours of the regular session.

Thirteen Republicans broke from House leadership to aid its passage, while 10 supported a crucial amendment that paved the way toward spending all money available.

Spending on education, health care, public projects and other programs would still be cut, but those cuts wouldn't be as deep as under the House plan.

"We were able to deliberate it in full," he said.

House Appropriations Committee Chairman Cameron Henry, a Metairie Republican who had been the most prominent proponent of deliberately leaving money out of the budget, was not present for Wednesday's debate.

Henry had traveled to Washington, D.C., early Wednesday after his political mentor, U.S. House Majority Whip Steve Scalise was critically injured in a shooting. Henry's brother is an aide to Scalise.

Barras said he felt that directing $60 million in savings was at least a reflection of the House effort to pare back spending.

"The Senate wouldn't support any cut," he said.

Several of the chamber's more conservative members, who had continued to push for $206 million to $100 million to be left off limits in the coming year, said they were disappointed in the final outcome.

"Once again, we are spending what perhaps we don't have," said Rep. Jack McFarland, R-Winnfield.

The deal closely resembles a budget proposal offered by the Senate in the final hours of the regular legislative session that never came to a vote. In that proposal, $50 million would have been set aside.

Barras has faced some criticism in recent days for blocking procedural maneuvers to secure a vote on the Senate proposal. On Wednesday, he said he doesn't regret delaying the vote to a special session, which costs the state thousands of dollars each extra day lawmakers are in Baton Rouge.

"I'm not sure it would have passed in those last few minutes," Barras said. "It would have been a tougher vote on Thursday.

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