

March 31, 2009

Legislature begins passing parts of the budget

*By Jay Gallagher
Albany Bureau*

ALBANY - State legislators started to pass budget bills today, racing against a midnight deadline to adopt a \$131.8 billion spending plan that opponents were calling "the big ugly."

But while the state Assembly began passing the budget, the effort in the Senate was stalled after Sen. Ruth Hassell-Thompson, D-Mount Vernon, became ill and was taken to an Albany hospital this afternoon. She was expected to return to the chamber this evening in time for budget voting to begin at 5:30 p.m.

The race against the clock may be futile, however. Some of the budget can't be voted on until Wednesday because bills need three days to age under state law; some weren't submitted until early Sunday.

The 2009-10 budget raises spending by \$10.5 billion to a total of \$131.8 billion for the fiscal year that starts Wednesday. It includes more than \$5 billion in higher taxes and fees, as well as less help for health-care facilities, schools and property taxpayers than had been promised previously by the state.

But lawmakers included the \$170 million for pork-barrel spending - the same amount as last year. About \$6.5 billion in federal stimulus money is helping to cushion the blow caused by a drop in state tax receipts.

"This budget's got pain in it for everybody," acknowledged Assembly Ways and Means Chairman Denny Farrell, D-Manhattan. "We tried to limit the pain."

But the spending plan means more expenses for New Yorkers for sometimes reduced services, one Republican said.

"This perpetrates an extra burden on businesses, families and taxpayers," said Assemblyman James Hayes, R-Amherst, Erie County. "It's a budget that simply cannot be afforded."

The Assembly this afternoon passed the first budget bill, covering transportation, economic development and transportation, by a vote of 93-53, and another for education, labor and family assistance, by a vote of 82-52.

A dozen Assembly Democrats, some of whom had been hearing complaints from constituents about the new taxes and fees, joined all Republicans in voting against the first bill, and 11 Democrats did on the second bill. The defections were not a problem in the overwhelmingly Democratic Assembly, but Senate Democrats were shaken Hassell-Thompson, became ill.

The Democrats, who hold only a 32-30 majority, need all of their members present and voting to approve a bill with no Republican votes. And all Republicans said they plan to vote against the budget, making Hassell-Thompson's presence that much more important.

Voting on the budget was expected to go late into the night, though some Senate Republicans said they don't intend to push the session too late. While the budget can be passed with 32 votes, at least 38 members are needed in the chamber to take any action.

The education budget holds steady the amount of state aid for school operating expenses, while extra money, much of it from the federal government, will increase the overall figure by about \$1.4 billion.

Still, some lawmakers pointed out, the spending plan also does away with \$1.5 billion in the STAR property-tax-rebate program, while keeping the basic and enhanced STAR programs that also lower school property taxes for homeowners.

"Constituents all across the state are outraged that with all of the restorations, we eliminated the small bit of (property-tax) relief they could get," said Assemblyman Marcus Molinaro, R-Tivoli, Dutchess County.

The Assembly debate was the first public discussion by lawmakers of the spending plan, which was put together by Paterson and legislative leaders behind closed doors over the past few weeks.

"This has been the most secretive budget process in history," Hayes said.

Supporters of the budget emphasized their attempts to have the state keep providing services even in the teeth of the most serious economic downturn in the state in decades.

"We will not back down from our commitment to a fair, balanced program that stimulates our economy," said Assemblyman Richard Brodsky, D-Greenburgh, Westchester County. The Democrats "stand for investment in our economy, employment of our people and stimulation of that economy."
