



April 1, 2009

Lawmakers OK budget bills

*By Jay Gallagher
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ALBANY - State legislators started passing budget bills Tuesday, racing against a midnight deadline to adopt an on-time \$131.8 billion spending plan that opponents were calling "the big ugly."

The race against the clock wasn't successful, however.

The state Senate passed one budget bill by party lines and then adjourned at 10 p.m. and will reconvene this morning. The Assembly was aiming toward having it done by midnight.

It will be the third straight year without an on-time budget, and the 23rd in the last 25 years that it was late.

The state Assembly began passing the budget midday, but the effort in the Senate was stalled in part until Tuesday evening because Sen. Ruth Hassell-Thompson, D-Mount Vernon, became ill and was taken to an Albany hospital.

She was diagnosed with pneumonia and brought back to the Capitol shortly after 7 p.m.

The 2009-10 budget raises spending by \$10.5 billion to a total of \$131.8 billion for the fiscal year that starts today. 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.

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 Marc Molinaro, R-Red Hook.
