

Governor: No party for you

No budget, no break for lawmakers option as state conventions near

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ALBANY -- Angry and frustrated at the lack of budget progress, Gov. David Paterson said he may force lawmakers to stay in the Capitol during their much-anticipated party conventions.

"I'll be here every day next week. And I will call special sessions on Thursday and Friday to make sure all of you are here next week and the week after," Paterson told Senate and Assembly leaders Tuesday.

The Democratic convention runs Tuesday through Thursday in Westchester County; the Republican convention takes place a week later.

While Tuesday marked the first time that legislative leaders have met with the governor since March 3, the session brought little apparent progress. Instead, all five participants repeated many of the same refrains, complaints and accusations that they've been employing for months.

At times, the meeting took on the feel of a high school detention room -- with Paterson acting as the beleaguered principal threatening to keep recalcitrant students from the prom.

For their part, lawmakers often resembled a gaggle of brooding adolescents who alternately fidgeted, stared at the floor or squabbled over who caused some hallway altercation.

But overall, everyone appeared firmly entrenched in their rhetorical positions about why, 48 days after the April 1 deadline, they have failed to close the \$9.2 billion gap and settled on a 2010-11 budget.

Paterson repeated his contention that the state is in its worst budget crisis in decades, and lawmakers fail to grasp how serious things are.

"Nobody wants to close parks. Nobody wants to demand extra money for license

plates," he said. "It is what it is."

Senate Democratic Conference Leader John Sampson, hoping to grow his razor-thin majority in November, hewed to his call for property tax relief and his desire to re-open state parks before the Memorial Day weekend. "Taxpayers are tired of the rhetoric," he said.

Senate Republican Minority Leader Dean Skelos, who wants to regain control of the chamber this fall, took an I-told-you-so approach, reminding his counterparts that Senate Republicans passed budgeting reforms when they were in the majority, only to see them die in the Assembly.

"The public, and rightly so, is frustrated and angry at the lack of Democrat leadership," said Skelos, who repeated his complaint that Republicans have been excluded from the process.

He also told Sampson his comments represented "the same speech that you gave back in March."

Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver described Republicans as the "party of no," the same moniker given to congressional Republicans who have fought most of President Barack Obama's initiatives.

When Assembly Republican Minority Leader Brian Kolb got a chance to speak, he was at a loss.

"I'm not sure where to begin," Kolb said. Like Skelos, he claimed that the GOP's budget-cutting ideas seem to have fallen on deaf ears in the governor's office.

"What is the plan to actually do something?," asked Kolb, who unlike Paterson, Silver, Skelos and Sampson has a background as a manufacturer rather than as a lawyer or career politician.

The list of problems and needed decisions in the face of the unfinished budget are piling up like the interest on a maxed-out credit card:

Tuesday marked the day when voters statewide cast school budget ballots. But with no state budget, districts were forced to estimate how much aid they would

get.

It also marked the second day parks across the state, including Thacher Park in Albany County and Schodack Island in Rensselaer County, are closed due to cuts.

Additionally, the deadline for the second round of the federal education innovation grants known as Race to the Top is approaching. Lawmakers need to sign off on changes to the state's education regulations if New York wants to compete for some of the \$3.4 billion at stake. New York lost out on the first round earlier this year when the Legislature, under pressure from the state's powerful education lobby, failed to approve innovations -- such as increased charter schools and better student tracking systems -- that the White House wanted to see.

Also, horse racing fans are awaiting a plan to loan the New York Racing Association the \$17 million to \$25 million NYRA says is needed to avoid endangering the Saratoga meet.

Finally, the Power for Jobs program, which offers low-cost electricity for industry and nonprofits, has yet to be renewed, although lawmakers reached conceptual agreement Tuesday.

Despite the surplus of unfinished business and nonstop squabbling, Tuesday's hour-long meeting led to a glimmer of budget hope, with lawmakers agreeing to convene conference committees to hash out budget details -- although even that concession came with an asterisk.

Paterson had urged lawmakers to start the committees, even though he later described them as a "little bit of a canard." (Last year's budget was completed without conference committees.)

Silver resisted the suggestion of immediately moving to conference committees, maintaining that public meetings amount to little more than "theater" unless all sides have a detailed fiscal plan specifying how much revenue and spending will be in the budget.

Paterson called the next five-way leaders meeting for 10 a.m. Tuesday. As he has previously done, the governor threatened to keep them in their seats until there is

a budget.

"They will get tired of seeing each other when I get finished with them," Paterson said.

As the meeting was winding down, the governor returned to his suggestion that the Legislature could immediately vote on his amended executive budget proposal. "Could each of you tell me why you couldn't put (the executive budget) on the floor and vote on it right now?," Paterson said. "And we'll be out of here today -- you wouldn't even have to have any conference committees."

"We want conference committees, governor," Sampson said.

Paterson comically hung his head in his hands.

"Oh, Scotty," he said, "beam me up."