

Lights out threat real?

Tough talk rises about state budget, possible no vote and shutdown

By **RICK KARLIN**, Capitol bureau

First published in print: Thursday, June 10, 2010

ALBANY -- Will state government come to a grinding halt next week? As is the case with so much surrounding the 71-day-late state budget, it depends on how this week's budget, brinkmanship and blame game plays out.

The contest was in full gear Wednesday as Gov. David Paterson and lawmakers argued, threatened and cajoled each other regarding a bill that must be approved Monday to keep the state operating for yet another week in lieu of a final 2010-11 budget.

With Paterson and lawmakers struggling to close a \$9.2 billion deficit, the governor has offered weekly extenders to authorize spending for basic functions such as payroll and jobless checks.

The bills have passed during the last two months with just enough support in the Legislature.

All 32 Senate Democrats have voted for them -- providing the minimum number needed for passage. But the Senate's 30 Republicans have voted no.

Two Democratic senators who have strayed from the party's agenda in the past -- Pedro Espada and Ruben Diaz Sr. -- are waffling on how they would vote.

"I don't know," Diaz said, adding he'd make up his mind after scouring through the extender, which will likely be issued late Friday. Diaz said he wouldn't vote for a bill that hurts people.

If either New York City-based lawmaker voted against the extender, that could mean a shutdown of state government -- at least temporarily -- unless one or more of the 30 Republicans supported it.

GOP lawmakers might vote for the bill, said Republican Minority Leader Dean Skelos of Nassau County. After arguing with Paterson earlier in the day, Skelos said the governor agreed to consider some of the suggestions the GOP has for \$400 million in Medicaid savings.

"If our recommendations are in there, you'll have a number of (yes) votes," Skelos said after they had what he described as a friendlier, brief meeting with Paterson later in the day.

But there were no guarantees the cuts would be embraced by Paterson.

"The governor made no commitment to putting anything in there," said Paterson spokesman Morgan Hook.

If this sounds like a case of brinkmanship, the blame game was on display a few hours earlier.

"I can't predict the future but I am shocked and I am appalled," Paterson said after a contentious leaders meeting.

"Senator Skelos has told us that he and the Republican senators are going to shut down the government."

Then, Senate Democrats to deride Skelos in a news release as "Doomsday Dean."

Skelos, meanwhile, was noting that there were no government shutdowns for all the years that the Senate was under Republican control (Democrats have had a majority since 2008).

"When we were in the majority, did you see government shut down?" he asked.

This isn't to say that all this brinkmanship and blame isn't resulting in some progress, halting as it may be.

Fearful of a shutdown, the governor released plans Wednesday to offer a \$1-a-pack cigarette tax increase as part of Monday's extender. Republicans have said they'll vote against any tax hikes.

And if Paterson embraces \$400 million in Medicaid savings suggested by the GOP, negotiators are that much close to a balanced budget.

But the question remains, exactly what would happen if lawmakers failed to pass another weekly extender on Monday? Technically, the state wouldn't be authorized to spend money, including state employee paychecks due on June 23 for approximately 153,000 people who work in the "administrative" phase of state government (paychecks for those in the "institutional" phase such as those who work as prison guards or in direct patient care will come on June 16 since they were approved in the June 7 extender).

If the checks don't go out, there's a good likelihood that unions would go to court, since they would be for work that has already been performed, and to not pay could be a violation of contracts.