

Peekaboo ‘reform’ returns to view as state’s budget wheels turn anew

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ALBANY — Where else but the State Capitol would following the law make news?

After two years of ignoring their own budget “reform” law, the Senate and the Assembly announced that they are restoring the open budget conference committee process to iron out fiscal differences in the weeks ahead.

The conference committees were not used in the last two years when Democrats controlled both houses of the Legislature. It was a lapse that the Senate majority leader, Republican Dean G. Skelos of Long Island, regularly pointed out in noting how the Assembly and the Senate failed to abide by their own budget reform law.

Now back in control of the Senate after two years out of power, Skelos said he is hopeful that the conference committees will increase the chances for an on-time budget before the start of the fiscal year April 1.

The conference committees have been criticized over the years for failing to give their rank-and-file members the authority to decide the big, burning issues of the budget. And, often, even the individual committees can’t agree on contentious issues—thereby bumping the matters up to the “mother ship” committee whose membership includes the top leaders of the Legislature. But the conference committee process does have its usefulness: The meetings can clarify — publicly — the thinking of the two houses over budget disputes. And, for those watching for an on-time budget, the sessions do have a way of instilling some sort of discipline to try to get an on-time budget.

The timetable envisions the two houses agreeing by March 1 on available revenues for the budget, a start-up of conference committees by March 15 and final passage by March 31.