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PENNSYLVANIA FINALLY CLOSES \$50.1B BUDGET DEAL



**By Christina Lengyel,
The Center Square**

After a 135-day wait and \$12 billion in taxpayer money collected, the state cemented a spending plan for all of it, and more.

Pennsylvania's final budget came in at \$50.1 billion, less than what Gov. Josh Shapiro initially asked for but well north of what Republican leadership had been looking to spend.

The legislation includes much of what Democrats had asked for in budgets passed by the House over the course of the last several months, like a new formula for cyber charter schools, a nearly \$1 billion infusion into public schools for educational programs, building remediation and student services, and support for food banks and health care providers.

Their biggest concession, it would appear, is seeing the state out of the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, an interstate compact to reduce carbon emissions. In late 2023, the Commonwealth Court deemed the program an unconstitutional tax — a decision Gov. Josh Shapiro

appealed, leaving in the hands of the liberal majority on the state Supreme Court.

"You can't budget in a silo. Numbers on a page don't mean anything if you can't look in the future and determine where Pennsylvania is going to grow economically," said Minority Leader Rep. Jesse Topper, R-Bedford. "And in February, we stated that the number one issue that we felt was holding Pennsylvania back from economic growth was the specter of RGGI."

"Being a part of the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative is truly what was keeping energy development out of Pennsylvania as we were losing jobs to West Virginia and Ohio. After today that specter will be gone."

Topper went on to cite important investments and reforms the state will be making, including tax credits and support to the public school system.

"I believe today's product, while not perfect, will move Pennsylvania forward and will leave a lasting impact on the commonwealth of Pennsylvania for the good," said Topper.

Topper wasn't the only Republican who spoke out in support of the bill.

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"I understand that there are concerns with the spend number amongst many of us, but I truly believe that the policies within this bill will spur our economy, will bring people back to Pennsylvania, will grow our businesses and help our communities in every corner of this state," said Minority Appropriations Chair Jim Struzzi, R-Indiana. "I encourage you to vote yes ... because it is the right bill for Pennsylvania right now."

Struzzi's colleagues took him up on the request, with a 156-47 vote carrying the bill through the House. All but one of the no votes came from Republicans.

The final deal is one of compromise, which will undoubtedly leave many individuals and industries wanting. Whether the call is for less spending and decreased regulation or more investment and legal protections, neither party is walking away with a budget that looks like their wish list.

According to Appropriations Chair Jordan Harris, D-Philadelphia, however, they're walking away with a document that represents the interests of the state's rural, urban and suburban populations.

"It's taken us a long time to get here, but the truth of the matter is we're here,

and we're here together," said Harris. "Not as a Democrat or Republican, not as a progressive or a liberal or a conservative, but this budget represents the best of what we can do collectively by calling ourselves Pennsylvanians."

Senators echoed many of the same sentiments, with the chamber's Republican majority heralding the RGGI exit and leaving the state's \$7.1 billion emergency savings account untapped as major accomplishments in the deal.

"This budget took a lot longer than anyone wished for, but ultimately we kept our promise to the people of Pennsylvania to not raise taxes," said Senate President Pro Tempore Kim Ward, R-Greensburg.

She went on to say that abandoning the regional carbon taxing program further reduced strain on taxpayers, who could have faced a 30 percent rise in utility bills in the coming years.

"Our energy will blossom ... I'm looking forward to the jobs and the development that will come because of it," she said. "The electric companies won't feel like that they have to cover what may be coming from a court decision."

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