

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR SOLVING PENNSYLVANIA'S BUDGET DIVIDE?



**By Christen Smith,
The Center Square**

There's an old saying that only two things in life are certain: death and taxes.

Perhaps Pennsylvania's hopelessly gridlocked Legislature may add one more: division. It's a chasm that, for now, is too broad for even the most engineering of cartoon characters to pole vault across.

Instead, Democrats and Republicans watch as cash from taxpayers' wallets floats down into the darkness of the canyon between them, with no apparent urgency to stop it, not even as Democratic Gov. Josh Shapiro cuts an authoritative figure on the horizon.

That's where figurative negotiation of the state budget stands, now well over 100 days overdue. It's the kind of lapse that could shut off the lights or send taxpayers to collections.

It will soon close the doors to county welfare offices, domestic violence shelters, and rape crisis centers.

Meanwhile, some schools lean deep into reserves, teetering just over the minimum balance legally required, even as a court ruling demands more funding not less.

But who should extend the proverbial olive branch? Democrats argue that they've done so a handful of times, only to be met with silence. Their latest attempt, a \$50 billion spending plan that shaved roughly \$1 billion off Shapiro's opening bid in February, was meant to illustrate their willingness to compromise.

It's still close to \$3 billion more than what the state has available to spend, according to Senate Republicans. For now, they argue, a stopgap measure that funds government at last year's levels would ease the pain inflicted on schools, counties, and taxpayers.

In a statement from the chamber's top GOP leaders, Sens. Joe Pittman and Kim Ward pointed out that the state's budget has ballooned 67 percent over the last decade, which "makes it clear that we must control the growth of our expenditures to prevent a fiscal calamity in the coming years."

(Continued on page 14)

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PENNSYLVANIA'S BUDGET DIVIDE

(Continued from page 13)

"What Democrats continuously fail to realize is that divided government requires true compromise," Pittman and Ward said. "This means a final budget agreement cannot simply be a checkbook for their reckless spending but must be a reasonable plan, which also includes Republican policies to support families and foster greater economic growth for Pennsylvania."

Democrats say the "copy and paste" budget amounts to less than nothing.

"Let me tell you what that actually means," said Rep. Jordan Harris, the Philadelphia Democrat who leads the House Appropriations Committee in what has been long considered one of the most influential chairmanships in the chamber. "That means they were willing to defund our police. That means they were willing to defund our schools. That means they were willing to defund our health care system in Pennsylvania."

"Because here's the thing. Just like you all sitting at home, you have an increase in your gas, your electric, you have an increase in your bills at home. The same way you have an increase, so does the state."

Shapiro, an ally to House Democrats, said divulging his own conversations with leadership doesn't help a deal get signed.

"What is helpful is for the Senate to get

its act together, get back to work and pass a budget," he said.

Voters don't see it that way, according to analysis from The Commonwealth Foundation, a nonprofit based in Harrisburg that supports fiscal conservatism. Rather, it's 72% who think Shapiro should be leading the way. Roughly two-thirds reject the four-figure tax hike that would land on families to support the \$50 billion spending plan.

"Governor Shapiro and House Democrats remain entrenched in partisanship around their insistence on runaway spending," Erik Telford, a foundation spokesman, told The Center Square in an email. "Their plan calls for billions in deficit spending and would saddle working families with a nearly \$2,000 tax hike."

Telford's comments echo their statewide call for the governor to "do your job" and "stop hurting Pennsylvanians," which will air on major networks across the state this weekend.

"Pennsylvanians reject this reckless approach and expect Shapiro to do his job – show leadership, work with the Senate, and deliver a responsible, bipartisan budget," he said. "So far, he's been either unwilling or unable to do that, and Pennsylvanians are paying the price."



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