

As Budget Fight Drags On, Public Is Mad As ... Well ...

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In the long hours of speechifying this month that marked the end of the Connecticut legislature's regular session - in which the General Assembly failed to pass a budget in the face of an \$8.7 billion deficit - one theme continually appeared.

The public, said speaker after speaker, usually from among the small contingent of Republicans in the chamber, was starting to get very mad.

"They are fuming mad, and people are hearing about it, myself included," said House Minority Leader Lawrence F. Cafero Jr., R-Norwalk, last week, in a remark that could have come from any number of floor speeches during the halting budget deliberations that have marked the past few months.

"That's what's going to get us back to the table, the good old public and their common sense, saying, 'Get on up there and do your job.'"

But just how upset are they?

As legislators prepare for an anticipated vote on a Democratic budget later this week as time runs out on the 2009 fiscal year, some local lawmakers said the reaction by many of their constituents to the standoff between the majority party and Gov. M. Jodi Rell has been one of relative understanding, given the massive challenges the state faces to balance its books.

And while those dependent on state grants and aid, especially city and town leaders, have seethed at the slow pace of negotiations, the state has not been gripped by the generalized rage that accompanied the crisis to which the current one is most often compared: the 1991 deficit that led the legislature and Gov. Lowell P. Weicker Jr. to impose an income tax.

The yellowed newspaper clippings of that long summer show crowds surrounding and spitting on the governor, massive anti-tax demonstrations at the Capitol, and at least one report of a bullet being fired into a state representative's house.

No shootings so far, said Rep. Ed Jutila, D-East Lyme, in an interview on Saturday, as he traveled to a ceremony for Eagle Scouts in Salem.

"I have to laugh when I hear some of the comments from the minority leader," Jutila said. "To hear him, you'd think we're all getting hundreds of calls a day and everyone we pass on the street is telling us we have to get a budget or the world's going to end."

The reality is more measured than that, Jutila said.

"Yes, we do have to get a budget done," he said. "But I think the average person on the street recognizes that we're in the midst of one of the biggest budget crises we've had, and that we've got a tough job to try to find a way to reach a compromise. I think people really do understand that this is a huge problem and good, honest people can disagree on how to solve it."

That's the vibe that Rep. Ernest Hewett, D-New London, is feeling, too.

"I'm hearing things from a few people," Hewett said. "They want a budget, and my response to them is we don't have one yet, and we can't cut our way out of it."

Rell and legislative Republicans have hammered away at the Democrats' insistence that tax hikes, including on the wealthy and corporations, will be necessary to close the gap. Those criticisms have seemed to have some effect, as Democratic leaders have begun easing back on their initial \$3 billion package of tax increases, restoring a property tax credit aimed at the middle class and raising the threshold at which income tax hikes would take effect, up to \$500,000 for couples filing jointly.

But Democrats are still planning to push forward a package that would raise \$2.8 billion in taxes, drawing howls from some quarters, but support from others, to hear lawmakers like Hewett tell it.

"Something's going to have to be raised somewhere," he said this weekend, referring to the tax increases, and warning that cutting some of the programs Rell would like to see reduced could be counterproductive. "Some people are going to have to suffer, and it's a question of who you want to suffer."

Of the decision to insist on income tax hikes for the wealthy, Hewett said flatly, "People in my district think it's fair."

Neither Hewett nor Jutila seemed to think that the impending vote would settle the matter, as Rell is likely to veto the Democrats' bill as soon as it reaches her. But if the budget debate seems doomed to stretch into the new fiscal year, the legislative equivalent of extra innings, the lawmakers themselves have begun to express a measure of resignation.

"There are a few people who remember past budget crises that went past July 1st," he said, "and this one is in that category."

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