

Capitol Beat
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Welcome to Albany of old! We are now seven days into a new fiscal year with a budget process more secretive and more behind closed doors than we have seen in probably fifteen years. If you were partial to three-men-in-a room, behind closed doors, then you just loved this budget session.

January 2007, shortly after the new governor, Eliot Spitzer took office, he and legislative leaders made much fanfare over a three-way agreed to budget reform legislation which became known as Chapter 1 of 2007. Under this new law, a quick start budget process for the agencies and new legislative budget process was to begin. By the end of 2007 that agency budget reform process was working well. Under the new law, available revenues must be determined by March 1st of each year.

On Friday, March 7th the sky fell in and on Monday, March 10th Governor Spitzer resigned. The following Monday, David Paterson was sworn in as Governor and had to quickly orient himself to budget negotiations. Later that week, Wall Street took a nosedive and with it went revenue that New York State counted on. The new Governor re-estimated revenues to be lower by \$800 million dollars and asked the agencies and the legislative leadership to cut spending in this new budget. But of course, this is an election year and asking legislators in an election year to cut spending, even in very trying economic times, is like trying to tell your four year old “you can’t have a cookie, before dinner.” Legislative leaders stomped their feet, ignored the governor and continued their election year binge.

The issue currently holding up the budget and keeping Albany in a state of either suspended animation or dumbfounded amazement is congestion pricing. This is an issue the League does not have a specific position on. It is a proposal championed by NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg. It would reduce congestion below 60th Street in Manhattan by charging \$8.00 per car for anyone driving in the City from 60th Street down to the tip of Manhattan at high peak traffic hours of the day. Environmentally, this may be a laudable goal. However, it has created a huge political firestorm. Budget negotiations (behind closed doors, between three-men-in-a room) have come to an abrupt halt while hour, after hour, after hour the issue was debated in the Assembly Majority Conference. As of today, April 7th the Assembly Majority decided not to bring the issue to the floor of the Assembly for a vote, killing congestion pricing. Following the announcement by the Assembly Democratic Majority, the Assembly adjourned. This prevented the Assembly Republican Minority from introducing a hostile amendment on the floor of the Assembly. Meanwhile over in the Senate, the Senate Democratic Minority walked off the floor preventing a quorum so that the Senate Republican Majority could not force a vote, thereby putting the downstate Democrats on the record on congestion pricing.

Following the failure of congestions pricing on Monday, April 7th, both houses of the legislature moved quickly to reach agreement on this year's budget. An agreement was announced on a \$121.9 billion dollar budget on Tuesday night and by 2:30 on Wednesday afternoon the Senate had passed the budget and adjourned. The Assembly followed shortly after. It is almost impossible at the moment to tell what exactly is in this budget as it was passed in secret with only briefings to the legislators in party conference. There were not open leaders meetings except for one. Some joint legislative budget committees never met and the rest met only once. The bulk of the this election year budget was done in one big ugly bill which will take several days to digest, to know with certainty how much legislative pork is in this year's budget. What we do know for certain is that the Governor and the legislative leaders both concede that this budget process was awful and they maintain that it won't happen again. How often have we heard that here in Albany? League members should make sure their legislators know that this process has done nothing to bring public trust or integrity back to government in Albany.

And the beat goes on...

