

Senate aims to end Pa. stalemate with budget votes

By **MARC LEVY**
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The state Senate approved key spending and tax bills Tuesday in a bid to pressure the House to go along with their plan to end Pennsylvania's long budget stalemate.

However, partisan friction and criticism by House Democratic leaders of spending on discretionary grant programs ensured more twists in the three-month-old battle to settle the state government's multibillion-dollar, recession-driven shortfall.

The \$27.8 billion spending plan passed the Republican-controlled Senate with overwhelming support shortly after Gov. Ed Rendell met with top lawmakers to try to resolve remaining differences in the politically divided Legislature.

"Certainly it's ultimately a compromise, and when you have a compromise, of course there are things that you like and things you don't like," said Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Jake Corman, R-Centre. "But it does meet the needs of Pennsylvania and it does make an historic ... contribution to and investment in education."

Overall, the Senate's budget plan would cut spending by more than 1 percent from last year but boost spending on instruction and operations of public schools by \$300 million, or 5.7 percent, a provision insisted on by Rendell.

Spending would be supported by nearly \$500 million in higher taxes on businesses that pay the capital stock and franchise tax, as well as on sales of cigarettes and little cigars. The state also would raise money by leasing land in state forests for natural gas drilling and legalizing and taxing table games at slot-machine casinos.

The spending bill passed the Republican-controlled Senate 43-6, while the tax bill passed 35-14. Rendell has said he supports the approach, but the House Democratic majority did not sign off on all details.

A House Democratic spokesman said Tuesday the caucus planned to strip \$12 million in discretionary grant programs from the Senate's budget and promptly send back a new version.

"We simply cannot condone a budget that includes (grants) in such a difficult economy, in such a difficult budget year," spokesman Brett Marcy said. "Those moneys should go to broad-based programs that help people in need."

Major disagreements between the House and Senate continue to dog table games legislation. And partisan disputes over the voting process flared, as well: House Democrats say budget-related bills sent over by the Senate could trigger House rules that require waiting several weeks for final votes.

A comprehensive state budget is more than three months late, the nation's longest such delay.

With hundreds of millions of dollars in state subsidies held up by the stalemate, the private organizations and businesses that deliver many of Pennsylvania's social services to the poor are closing or laying off workers, putting off bills and borrowing money to survive.

Among the hardest hit are shelters for the homeless and victims of domestic violence, food pantries and nutrition programs, mental health counseling, and child care.

The Senate's votes come less than a week after the collapse of a previous agreement between Rendell and leaders of the House Democrats and of both parties in the Senate.

Rank-and-file House Democrats opposed the plan's proposal to tax small games of chance fundraisers and tickets to live stage performances and cultural sites, such as parks and zoos. Instead, they replaced those with taxes on natural gas extraction, cigars and other tobacco products — all taxes opposed by the Senate.

To resolve it, the sides appear to have agreed to leave out all four taxes and make further spending cuts.

County exec Onorato launches Governor bid

By **PETER JACKSON**
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Allegheny County Executive Dan Onorato announced Tuesday that he will run for governor, joining what promises to be a crowded field in next spring's Democratic primary.

Onorato opened a three-day tour of the state with appearances in Philadelphia, the state's Democratic hub, and at a park in Harrisburg. At an evening rally in his home city of Pittsburgh, police arrested about half a dozen protesters who were angry about police tactics used during the recent Group of 20 economic summit.

He pledged to fight to improve Pennsylvania's business climate, enhance educational opportunities, reclaim abandoned industrial sites and reform the state government. He promised to spell out the details in a series of position papers in the coming months.

"For the past 20 years, I've been preparing for this position," he told several dozen cheering supporters gathered on a shady bank of the Susquehanna River a few blocks from the Capitol,

where Gov. Ed Rendell and lawmakers were continuing to wrangle over the state budget.

Onorato, whose campaign committee had accumulated more than \$4 million by the end of last year, touted his six-year record as Allegheny County's highest-ranking elected official. Pittsburgh has gone from the brink of bankruptcy to a vibrant metropolis with below-average unemployment and above-average job growth, he said.

Previously a Pittsburgh city councilman and county controller, Onorato touted his successful effort to eliminate four of the county's 10 row offices and to consolidate five 911 emergency centers into a single facility. He also took credit for reducing the county's 6,000-person payroll by nearly 10 percent.

Onorato, 48, defended new levies on rental cars and alcoholic drinks in bars and restaurant as the county's only option for financing mass transit.

"I have shown that you can hold the line on taxes, streamline government (and) provide quality services," he said.

Other announced or likely Democratic candidates are state

Auditor General Jack Wagner, a former state senator from Pittsburgh; businessman Tom Knox, who unsuccessfully ran for Philadelphia mayor in 2007; Montgomery County Commissioner Joe Hoeffel, a former congressman who unsuccessfully challenged Sen. Arlen Specter in 2004; and Scranton Mayor Chris Doherty.

State Attorney General Tom Corbett and U.S. Rep. Jim Gerlach of Chester County are vying for the Republican nomination.

A Quinnipiac University poll released last month revealed that the Democratic candidates lack statewide name recognition. Seventy-one percent or more of the respondents said they did not know enough about the candidates to form an opinion about them.

About half the respondents were familiar with Corbett, the state's top law enforcement official since 2005. Forty-three percent viewed him favorably and 7 percent unfavorably.

Onorato planned additional campaign appearances Wednesday in Johnstown, State College and Wilkes-Barre, and on Thursday in Allentown and Erie.

Pregnant instructor sues Pa. gym gunman's estate

A pregnant aerobics instructor who was wounded in a health club shooting in August sued the estate of the gunman Monday, saying related stress has put her in danger of a miscarriage.

Mary Beth Primis was 10 weeks pregnant when she was leading the aerobics class at an L.A. Fitness Health club in Collier Township on Aug. 4. George Sodini fired at least 52 shots from three weapons, wounding Primis in both shoulders, and hitting 11 other women, three of whom died, before fatally shooting himself.

Primis, 26, was wounded in both shoulders and hospitalized for more than a week. Her fetus survived, though her attorneys claim she suffered "stress and harm while pregnant" and remains in danger

of miscarriage as a result. Danielle Elderkin, a spokeswoman for the attorneys, said Primis is due to give birth in March.

"One can't even begin to imagine the emotional and physical strain this has put on Ms. Primis," attorney George Kontos said. "The horror of that tragic day will remain with her for a lifetime. Filing this lawsuit is just one step as she continues through her healing process."

Primis and her husband, Alex, of Moon Township, are seeking at least \$175,000 in damages from the estate of the 48-year-old Sodini, of Scott Township. Sodini willed \$225,000 to his alma mater, the University of Pittsburgh, which refused the gift. At least two other victims have filed papers saying

they intend to sue Sodini's estate but have yet to file complaints.

The estate's attorney, Rebecca Bowman, said she has not seen the lawsuit and could not comment on it even if she had.

At least five other people have filed notices that they intend to sue the estate, Bowman said.

According to a Web diary that surfaced after the shootings, Sodini seethed with anger and frustration toward women, claiming he hadn't had a girlfriend since 1984 and hadn't slept with a woman in 19 years.

"Women just don't like me. There are 30 million desirable women in the US (my estimate) and I cannot find one. Not one of them finds me attractive," he lamented.