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Virginia's state budget talks break down, special session possible

BY MICHAEL MARTZ Richmond Times-Dispatch 3 hrs ago



Virginia State Capitol building photographed from the roof of the SunTrust Bank building.
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The Virginia General Assembly will not adopt a state budget by its scheduled adjournment on Saturday, raising the possibility of a special session to resolve an impasse over expanding the state's Medicaid program, budget leaders said Thursday.

Senate Majority Leader Tommy Norment, R-James City, said budget negotiations between the Senate and the House of Delegates have ended, but the way forward is unclear as the legislature prepares to end its scheduled 60-day session in two days.

"We're looking at whether we need to extend the session, or go into special session," Norment said in an interview after a meeting of the Senate Republican Caucus. "The dialogue is continuing."

House Appropriations Chairman Chris Jones, R-Suffolk, confirmed the decision to end talks by the 13-member budget conference committee and settle on a path forward.

"While we made much progress, we're not in a position to get the budget done by Saturday," said Jones, who subsequently informed the full House of the decision to either extend the current session by 30 days or adjourn to reconvene in special session.

Gov. Ralph Northam discussed the issue with Jones and House Speaker Kirk Cox, R-Colonial Heights, earlier on Thursday, said spokesman Brian Coy, who declined to comment on those discussions or the governor's position on how to proceed.

"The governor has been very clear that he prefers a budget that includes (Medicaid) coverage expansion as soon as possible," Coy said.

This would be the first time the assembly has adjourned without a budget or convened in special session since 2014, when the House and Senate deadlocked on the proposed expansion of Medicaid during the first year of Gov. Terry McAuliffe's term.

Then, the Senate had proposed Marketplace Virginia as a private insurance approach to using federal dollars under the Affordable Care Act to expand Medicaid coverage for hundreds of thousands of uninsured Virginians. The House strongly opposed expansion, ultimately defeating the proposal the first of four times during McAuliffe's term.

Earlier on Thursday, Jones asked the House to defer action on Senate Bill 915, proposed by Sen. Siobhan Dunnavant, R-Henrico, as a limited alternative to full expansion of Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, but without money in the Senate budget to pay for it.

The budget chairman had sent the legislation to the House floor without a Senate amendment to link enactment to funding in the budget. He had planned to amend it with a substitute bill to carry out Medicaid expansion, as proposed in the House budget, as a way to allow Senate

Republicans to vote on the issue outside of the budget.

Jones said Thursday that he will instead allow Dunnavant's bill to die without action in the House, which must complete action on all bills by midnight under the procedural resolution for the assembly session that began Jan. 10.

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