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Virginia Politics

Va. leaders may vote on stripped-down budget



BY LAURA VOZZELLA June 11 at 8:19 PM

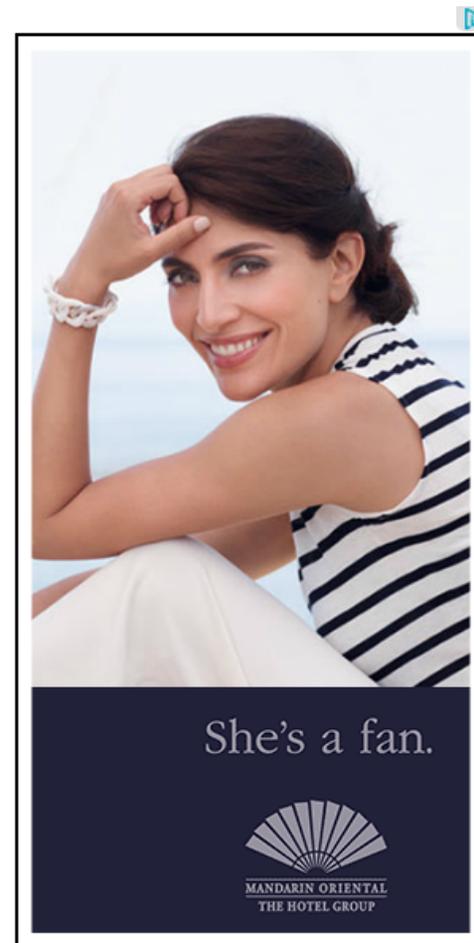
RICHMOND — House and Senate budget leaders hope to end a months-long [standoff](#) Thursday by passing a state budget stripped not only of Medicaid expansion but also of teacher raises and other spending increases.

House budget leaders on Wednesday unveiled a two-year, \$96 billion spending plan that their Senate counterparts indicated they would be willing to accept and fast-track to Gov. Terry McAuliffe (D).

But at least a few Republicans are expressing concern that the long-stalled budget process is suddenly moving too quickly. They fear that there could be language buried deep in the budget bill that would authorize the governor to expand Medicaid, McAuliffe's top legislative priority.

“The fear is that in all of the sausage making, this language . . . will somehow remain embedded in this telephone book of a bill and it would provide some maneuvering room for the governor to unilaterally enact Medicaid expansion,” said Sen. Richard H. Black (R-Loudoun).

Black pointed to language in the budget stating: “There is hereby



appropriated sum sufficient nongeneral funds for such costs as may be incurred to implement coverage for newly eligible individuals pursuant to . . . the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act.”

Matthew Moran, a spokesman for House Speaker William J. Howell (R-Stafford), said the language was carried over from the previous budget. Its purpose is to authorize additional Medicaid spending if — and only if — a state Medicaid commission set up by the legislature agrees to expansion, he said.

“There is no language in the budget that gives the governor the authority to expand Medicaid, plain and simple,” Moran said.

The budget plan rolled out Wednesday at a meeting of the House Appropriations Committee calls for holding most state spending at current levels to account for a projected budget shortfall that has swelled in recent weeks to \$1.5 billion.

The few exceptions are mostly in areas where the state is bound by certain legal or financial commitments, such as increasing school funding to match rising enrollment.

But most new spending that had been in earlier House or Senate budget plans — raises for teachers and state employees, expanded pre-kindergarten programs, inflation adjustments for hospitals — is gone.

“There’s going to be a lot for everyone not to like tomorrow night,” S. Chris Jones (R-Suffolk), the committee’s chairman, said at a gathering with reporters afterward. He said he was just glad that the plan does not call for cuts from existing spending levels.

“We got thrown a hard slider last month, and we’re gonna make sure we don’t leave too many men on base,” he said.

The budget proposal would still boost mental health funding by about \$50 million. The issue became a priority after the son of Sen. R. Creigh Deeds (D-Bath) stabbed his father and fatally shot himself in November after a local mental health official said — erroneously — that there was

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no psychiatric bed available and sent him home from the hospital.

The budget will still make payments required under the law to beef up the state's underfunded pension system. Johnna Cossaboon, spokeswoman for the Virginia Governmental Employees Association, said she was grateful for that — and for the fact that a state shutdown seems likely to be averted.

“We were really worried about not having a budget,” she said. “We were getting e-mails and phone calls, ‘What happens? Do we get our paychecks?’ And we said, ‘We don’t know. It’s never happened before. We recommend you be prudent. We don’t recommend you go and buy a house or a car right now.’”

Budget talks, stalled since February over whether the state should expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, picked up speed in recent weeks as a critical deadline drew close. State government could shut down if there is not a spending plan in place by July 1.

Also contributing to the urgency: State officials announced a few weeks ago that revenue for the two-year budget cycle could come in more than \$1 billion lower than projected. The estimate has since been upped to \$1.5 billion.

The final breakthrough came Monday, when a conservative Democratic senator from southwest Virginia stepped down, suddenly giving Republicans a 20-to-19 advantage in the chamber.

McAuliffe, Senate Democrats and three moderate Republicans in that chamber support expanding health coverage to up to 400,000 uninsured Virginians. The GOP-dominated House is firmly opposed, questioning whether Washington can afford to keep its promise to pick up most of the \$2 billion-a-year tab.

Three moderate Republicans in the Senate continue to support a form of Medicaid expansion that would use the federal funds to buy private insurance for enrollees. Even with the [departure of Sen. Phillip P.](#)

[Puckett](#), expansion supporters still outnumber opponents in that chamber 22 to 17.

But with the House showing no signs of budging and a potential shutdown looming, they have agreed that the budget must come first. A moderate Democrat, Senate Finance Committee Chairman Charles J. Colgan (Prince William), has also indicated that he believes the state needs to get a budget in place first.

It remains to be seen how McAuliffe will react to the budget. Once it reaches his desk, he will have seven days to make any amendments and send the bill back to the legislature.

“Obviously, he wants Medicaid in there — he thinks it’s the right thing for Virginia. But right now, it’s the General Assembly’s responsibility to send him a budget, and the governor will review it carefully,” McAuliffe spokesman Brian Coy said. “We will make announcements about whatever actions he takes when the review is complete.”

Coy added, with a laugh: “At the pace they’re working, somebody’s got to read this budget.”