

Assembly's final week: Partisan rift on budget looms

By **Erin Cox**
The Baltimore Sun

APRIL 6, 2015, 7:10 AM

The **General Assembly** session that began with a call for bipartisanship is poised to end with a partisan showdown on the budget.

Republican Gov. **Larry Hogan** wants lawmakers to approve the tax relief he says he was elected to deliver, but the Democratic-controlled legislature wants him to spend more on public schools and state employee pay.

With just seven days until legislature adjourns for the year April 13, the public stalemate is no closer to resolution than it was weeks ago.

"The money's there, the question is what Hogan's going to do with it," House Speaker **Michael E. Busch** said.

The budget is among hundreds of bills to be voted on in both chambers before the 90-day session ends, but it is the only bill the General Assembly is constitutionally required to approve.

Legislators carved out more than \$200 million that they want Hogan to direct to specific priorities, including K-12 education and restoring a 2 percent pay raise for the state workforce.

But Hogan is not required to spend the cash. And last week he released a budget document suggesting he had no plans to do so unless the Assembly moves forward on his proposals for several tax cuts and charter school reform.

"Governor Hogan's top priority for the last week of session is the same that it has been since day one: provide tax relief to Maryland citizens and advance education initiatives, including a bill that strengthens our public charter school law," Hogan's spokeswoman Shareese Churchill said.

The standoff on key priorities brings a different tone to the final week of lawmaking, as Annapolis works through **Martin O'Malley** had his **lects a philosophical**

The Assembly has delayed action on or revamped several of Hogan's key initiatives — a new law on charter schools, tax cuts that would average \$69 for retired veterans and \$72 for small businesses, and a new program that would create as much as \$5 million in tax breaks for businesses that donate to private schools.

The Maryland Senate on Friday considered a rewritten version of Hogan's charter schools bill that would grant some flexibility to the alternative schools, but give far less freedom to charters than the governor requested. The House of Delegates has not taken a vote on any version of the bill.

Debates still loom on a series of other headline-grabbing topics.

"Even though it's only a week," Senate Minority Leader **J.B. Jennings** said, "it's almost an eternity in terms of getting bills done."

Lawmakers have moved further than ever before toward enacting a moratorium on hydraulic fracturing. A Hogan priority to repeal a stormwater fee that critics deride as the "rain tax" has passed the Senate and is pending in the House.

An online-hotel-booking sales tax that would impact companies such as Expedia could possibly send millions in uncollected taxes into state coffers.

The Senate approved a bill to make it easier to get a divorce, but it awaits House action. Neither chamber has acted on whether to extend the statute of limitations for child sex abuse victims to file civil lawsuits against their attackers.

The legislature has already ended debate on a controversial bill to make Maryland a right-to-die state, choosing to resume discussion next year on whether doctors could prescribe a lethal dose of medication to certain terminally ill patients.

And in a year when police brutality issues consumed debate in Baltimore and across the country, lawmakers in Annapolis said no to bills designed to make it easier to discipline officers.

Though many issues remain outstanding, key leaders of both parties and in both chambers expect the debate over the budget to remain the most controversial issue.

"My priority is getting the structural budget under control," said Jennings. "Let's fix that first, and then we'll talk about tax relief next year."

Hogan's spokeswoman declined to say to what extent the governor was willing to negotiate to grant Democrats the K-12 funding they want.

Instead, Churchill said Hogan "remains committed to working with the legislature to reach a budget resolution that delivers fiscal responsibility and addresses the biggest concerns of Maryland's citizens."

House and Senate negotiators began meeting last week to iron out differences between the budget bills each chamber passed late last month, but Senate Budget & Tax Committee Chairman Ed Kasemeyer, a Democrat, said the differences were minuscule compared to the rift with the governor.

"The main thing we need to find out is what priorities the governor will fund," he said.

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