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Albany's Open Budget Meetings Aren't the Whole Story

By MICHAEL COOPER

ALBANY, March 7 - Even in Albany's new era of openness, in which Gov. George E. Pataki and the state's legislative leaders now allow reporters to watch their budget negotiations, much of the real action still seems to take place offstage, between acts.

So it was that on Monday, as the leaders met publicly for the fifth time this year, they were able to announce that since the last public meeting, their staffs had agreed on how much the governor's spending proposals would actually cost. And Senator Joseph L. Bruno, the Republican majority leader, said that he and Mr. Pataki were having separate negotiations over what he said were seven or eight of their biggest disagreements on the policies in the governor's proposed budget.

Democrats questioned those separate negotiations, suggesting that they violated the spirit of the open leadership meetings. Senator David A. Paterson, the leader of the Senate's Democratic minority, said he had been unaware of them until they surfaced at Monday's meetings. "It sounded like private meetings being held coincidental to public meetings, which is not going to help," he said. "It doesn't build trust."

Governor Pataki praised his fellow Republicans in the Senate for bringing him their concerns, and complained that with less than a month until the April 1 budget deadline, he had still not received the specific objections of the Democratic-led Assembly. "Most of the work has been done by the staffs, and that's the way it is every year," the governor said, explaining that the leaders step in when their staffs cannot agree.

The state's leaders turned to the open negotiations this year as they strive to break the state's 20-year record of late budgets. So far they have reached agreements faster than usual on how much the state can expect to raise in revenues next year and on how much the governor's proposals are expected to cost. All told, Governor Pataki and the Legislature have agreed that the state will have more than \$1.4 billion more available than the governor predicted when he released a \$105.5 billion spending plan in January.

The governor wants the Legislature to begin passing budget bills next week, but Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, who is trying to wring policy and spending concessions from the governor, said his house would pass only a nonbinding resolution, and Senator Bruno said his house would be able to pass bills only if his negotiations with the governor proved successful. This prompted a minidebate about the relative thickness of budget bills (nearly 12 inches, when the papers are stacked) and resolutions (more like an inch.)

But there are bigger, more controversial battles ahead, and just a few weeks to resolve them before the budget deadline. Senator Bruno, a Republican, has said that he thinks the state has billions of dollars more available to spend next year, to which the governor has reacted coolly. And the leaders have yet to get to the heart of the budget negotiations: how much the state should spend on education, health care and transportation.

There was a hint of the battles to come on Monday, when Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver faulted Governor Pataki for proposing to spend too little on the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. "It's nine billion short," Mr. Silver said.

"I think it's 19.4 billion," Mr. Pataki replied.

Mr. Silver, a Democrat whose Assembly majority is heavily concentrated in New York City and the surrounding counties that use the M.T.A., noted that the authority had originally sought a five-year capital plan of nearly \$28 billion.

The governor said, "That's right, and we think this is an adequate plan, given where we are."

At that point Senator Bruno, whose Republican majority has a strong suburban and upstate base that relies heavily on the roads and transportation spending that usually accompanies expansions of the M.T.A.'s budget, put in his way more than two cents: "And the 17 billion-plus for the highways, that's usually in tandem."

The governor, who is under pressure to contain spending, said, "Let's try to move forward here."

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