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Politics

Backroom deals are back in play in Annapolis

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BALTIMORE -

We were back in the backroom again last week, standing around watching senators and delegates hash out their differences on the state budget.

At the same conference table on a late Sunday afternoon four months ago, with some of the same senators present, lawmakers added the computer services tax onto the tax increases rammed through the House and Senate early the next morning.

Now, after some fierce re-education by IT professionals contemplating moves out of state to avoid the tax, they fully recognize their mistake.

The negotiators knew they could be back at the table later this week wrangling over the additional budget transfers and reductions in spending growth they would need to repeal the \$200 million tax.

Core Responsibilities

The budget is considered the concrete expression of the state's policy choices.

Yet lost amid the incredible budget detail — close to 2,500 pages in three volumes — is the question: What are the core state responsibilities?

A "thorough and efficient system of free public schools" is the only required state spending mandate, but until five years ago, the bulk of that responsibility fell on the shoulders of the counties.

Roads, prisons and social services also seem to be part of core.

Advocates for state measures in reducing greenhouse gases — through regulation, not direct spending — acknowledge the rules would be unnecessary if the federal government was doing its proper job.

The same exists for health coverage, which is a split funding responsibility with the federal government.

Yet there's never enough to meet every need, and never enough votes to kill a program once it's started.

[Sen. David Harrington, D-Prince George's](#) and former chairman of the [Prince George's County Council](#), wanted to require 150 minutes of physical activity through eighth grade to counteract growing obesity.

The estimated cost is an additional \$26 million for the counties.

Due to the price tag, the Senate set up a task force to study the new requirement.

[Sen. Catherine Pugh, D-Baltimore](#) City, wanted to boost the age of compulsory school attendance from 16 to 18 years old.

She settled for 17.

The price tag is \$50 million; though when teenagers drop out of school after September, their schools don't have to return the state funding based on the number of pupils.

Funding for stem cell research — which [President Bush](#) has refused to provide — certainly seems to fall outside the state's core responsibilities, but is a popular program nonetheless, in a state where federal dollars for medical research adds tens of thousands of jobs.

Hailing Hopkins

The retiring president of Maryland's largest private employer, Johns Hopkins University's William Brody, got a standing ovation in the Senate last Wednesday.

There was mutual stroking on both sides.

Brody praised lawmakers for their support of health care and higher education.

Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller, D-Calvert and Prince George's, thanked Brody for polishing a state jewel that is perhaps the only Maryland institution recognized around the world.

Maryland has funneled \$56 million into private colleges and university this year, and Hopkins gets about half of that.

But that pales in comparison to Hopkins' 41,000 employees and the \$1.2 billion in federal research grants the university hauls in, the highest amount of any U.S. university.

This is partly due to the university's applied physics lab in Howard County, which gets \$680 million in grants, mostly for defense and space projects.

Controlling

the comptroller

In addition to the numbers, the state budget bill contains a lot of language directing state agencies to focus on this or report on that.

A minor sticking point between the House and Senate is language that senators tacked saying Comptroller Peter Franchot could only spend the money to fulfill his constitutional duties.

Members of the House Appropriations Committee — on which Franchot had been a subcommittee chairman — removed the language and argued in their meeting with their Senate counterparts that it ought to stay gone.

Miller had complained that Franchot was spending money on staff to promote himself and not on collecting taxes.

"Sometimes we use sign language," Senate Budget Chairman Ulysses Currie, D-Prince George's, said cryptically.

Del. Mary-Dulany James, D-Harford and Cecil, called the language "superfluous," and Del. Charles Barkley, D-Montgomery, wondered how it could possibly be enforced.

"The auditors would have fun with it," remarked Warren Deschenaux, the legislature's fiscal chief, referring to the accounting watchdogs who also work for the General Assembly.

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