

The News-Gazette.com

Overtime budget talks yield no progress

By [Kate Clements](#)

Wednesday June 6, 2007

SPRINGFIELD – The first round of overtime budget talks on Tuesday failed to resolve the stalemate over a spending plan for the year beginning July 1.

"It was not an extremely productive meeting," said Patty Schuh, spokeswoman for Senate Minority Leader Frank Watson, R-Greenville.

The closed-door session did little more than allow the governor and the four legislative leaders a chance to lay out their already well known positions. No actual movement was reported.

House Speaker Michael Madigan, D-Chicago, said the electric rate issue must be resolved before his chamber will release the limited-growth budget it passed last week and allow it to be considered in the Senate.

"There has got to be significant, significant reductions and rollbacks," Madigan said.

Senate President Emil Jones, D-Chicago, continues to oppose a rate freeze. But the stalemate over how best to help Ameren and Commonwealth Edison customers deal with this year's rate hikes is not the only thing standing in the way of a budget deal.

Republicans claim that the House Democratic budget is not balanced, and they do not support the \$200 million worth of business tax hikes it includes.

Education groups say it fails to address the state's school funding problems, and the governor's top priority- health care for everyone, is noticeably absent. Jones also noted the lack of any significant increases for education and health care.

"It's not really a good budget," he said on Tuesday.

According to House Minority Leader Tom Cross, R-Oswego, there is still no agreement among the leaders on how much to increase spending, where that money should go and how to raise it.

"I'd say we're far apart," he said.

Blagojevich spokeswoman Abby Ottenhoff said more meetings are planned as soon as today, and encouraged the legislative leaders to keep rank-and-file lawmakers in Springfield five days a week until a budget deal is reached.

"The stakes are high," she said. "If we don't complete a budget, if lawmakers don't send the governor a budget before the end of the month, then essential services will be eliminated and we face a government shutdown. So, we are looking forward to many more meetings with the leaders and with legislators."

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