



ANALYSIS

Is this any way to run a state?

Sides just keep volleying the issues

Wednesday, July 30, 2003

BY PETER L. DeCOURSEY
Of The Patriot-News

Lawmakers and the governor are playing a five-way game of pingpong.

The House and Senate have each ignored bills addressing a major issue passed by the other chamber, only to pass their own legislation.

Instead of meeting to hammer out the differences, each chamber just swats the ball back to the other.

Even in the rare instance when the House and Senate majorities agree on an issue, such as education funding, Gov. Ed Rendell uses veto threats to hit the ball back into play.

Every caucus from the House Democrats to the Senate Republicans has at least one measure stopped cold. Those measures include property tax reform, slots at racetracks, drunken-driving reform, education funding and preschool programs.

So why is everybody playing, but nobody -- especially taxpayers -- winning?

Because getting the House and Senate Republicans, and House and Senate Democrats and the Democratic governor to agree on anything substantial has been impossible.

"When was the last time that all four caucuses and the governor were at the table for any negotiation?" asked John Estey, Rendell's chief of staff.

Such stalemates were not seen in recent years. Govs. Tom Ridge and Mark Schweiker ignored Democrats and accepted policy input mostly from their fellow Republicans in the Legislature.

But the Democratic governor and Republican leadership in the Legislature have clashed. Even House and Senate Democrats have been divided, criticizing their respective versions of bills to allow slots at racetracks.

Polls say voters want lawmakers to cut property taxes, legalize slots, crack down on drunken drivers and supply seniors with cheaper prescription drugs. But they see a Legislature and governor in a process of endless volleying.

So far, the consequences have been minimal. Drug and alcohol programs have closed, but the

state has found money to keep some open.

Schools that rely on the state for more than one-third of their money don't open for a month. Property tax relief is postponed until July 2004. Federal penalties for ignoring the drunken-driver standard mandate have cost the state \$3 million so far.

But as those groups imagine this impasse lasting through the autumn, their fears are mounting.

Senate Republicans "are least inclined to raise taxes," of any of the four caucuses, said spokesman Erik Arneson.

Rendell is "not inclined to settle until the state's revenue problems and education policies Pennsylvania needs for the future, are resolved," Estey said.

"We're not going to agree to things we don't believe are good ideas, just because the governor is in love with them," Senate Majority Leader David J. Brightbill, R-Lebanon, said last month, referring to Rendell's plans for slots and a quarter-billion dollars for early childhood education.

Senate Republicans generally resist creating "entitlements," state programs which require the state to pay ever-greater amounts for anyone who qualifies.

Rendell has proposed three major entitlements: expanding the pool of seniors who would get cheaper prescription drugs, and offering preschool and full-day kindergarten at first to kids in poor districts, and eventually to everybody.

Rendell says the state owes students the preschool that leads to a better-trained work force and creates economic expansion. Senate Republicans say there is no evidence more money leads to better education, but good evidence that more entitlements lead to higher tax bills.

But while Rendell hoped fellow Democrats would present a united front on issues, the House and Senate Democrats have warred as vigorously with each other on slots legalization, as they have with the House and Senate GOP.

"Everyone is empowered," Estey said, adding "we have to work a little harder."

But it requires more than work. All four caucuses and hundreds of lawmakers, aides, and lobbyists have poured thousands of hours into this budget fight. But all they've done is keep the ball in play.

PETER L. DECOURSEY: 255-8115 or pdecoursey@patriot-news.com

Copyright 2003 PennLive.com. All Rights Reserved.