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Editorial: Ball of confusion / It's time to uncouple the state spending proposals

Friday, November 28, 2003

Five months into the fiscal year, it is long past time for the Legislature and Gov. Ed Rendell to come to terms on spending and programs. Imagine living in a new home for five months while holding out with the bank over the details of a mortgage.

It doesn't happen in the real world. It shouldn't happen in Harrisburg.

Yet the Republicans in the General Assembly and the Democrat in the governor's office are behaving as if this game of fiscal chicken can continue like a long-running TV series. Only now it's beginning to feel as stale as summer reruns.

Held hostage are Pennsylvania taxpayers, who have no idea what this year's tab will be or how they'll be expected to pay it. Yet it was work that the law says should have been completed by July 1.

Pennsylvania is now the only state in the nation that has not finished its education spending plan for 2003-04. School districts have had to borrow money for lack of state subsidy payments that have been held up by the impasse. Drag this out further, and some school district, somewhere, will be forced to shut down.

Though the House has compromised with the governor at \$250 million in new education spending (down from the Rendell plan's original \$600 million), the Senate wants to obliterate the proposal to \$12.5 million.

That minuscule amount would go for tutoring only and would fail to fund the governor's initiatives for early childhood education and all-day kindergarten, which could boost the performance and readiness in children from poor communities.

But the new education programs are balled up with other sticky financial issues: elimination of the \$1.5 billion deficit that the governor inherited, the restoration of spending cuts for services like mass transit and addiction treatment, and a tax swap that could cut property taxes statewide.

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In isolation, these are good things. In reality, they may be impossible to get at once. For that reason, it's time to call a truce, unpack the package and accomplish what the state can afford *today*.

This will not come as good news to the governor, who has fought on the side of the angels for education measures that would better prepare at-risk children and that would level the playing field for impoverished school districts. But we don't hear a resounding cry in southwestern Pennsylvania for raising the personal income tax from 2.8 percent to 3.25 percent (with a fallback to 3.1 percent in July) to carry the governor's agenda.

In fact, The Pennsylvania Poll conducted for the Post-Gazette in late October showed that 66 percent of Allegheny County residents opposed raising the tax to 3.1 percent, while only 28 percent were in favor.

We think the order of business should be: end the deficit, sustain public education and fill the gaps on other critical spending needs.

If the economy picks up in Pennsylvania, as it appears to be doing nationwide, then next year may be a more opportune time to launch new early-childhood programs and property tax reform.

In politics as in warfare, there's a time to declare a draw, if only to end a stalemate. That time in Harrisburg is now.

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