

## Leaders agree to bipartisan budget panels

Democrats bow to GOP pressure to not exclude them from process, as happened in 2009

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ALBANY -- After weeks of complaints by Republican lawmakers, the Democrats controlling both houses of the Legislature are scheduling bipartisan committees to hammer out a budget.

"Conference committees are set to begin ... and are important to ensuring a fair, responsible and bipartisan budget," said Travis Proulx, a spokesman for the Democrats who control the state Senate.

Proulx said the plan is to release today a specific schedule of hearings, as well as the members of each party who will take part. Lawmakers are required to pass the state's budget by April 1. Gov. David Paterson has proposed a spending plan for the next year totaling \$134 billion.

Democrats control the governor's office and both the Senate and Assembly, leaving Republicans with little leverage in the budget negotiating process.

In 2009, Democrats used their dominance as justification to forego joint committees of the Legislature, during which a draft budget is debated and amended.

Republicans, particularly in the closely divided Senate, cried foul then -- no GOP senator voted for the 2009 budget -- and repeated their criticism last week.

"Despite what they think, we have ideas, too. We have good ideas. But if they don't let us in, that's arrogant and that means they're not listening to the public," said Senate Minority Leader Dean Skelos, R-Long Island.

Skelos unveiled a plan to reduce property taxes, and charged Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver and Senate Democratic Conference Leader John Sampson are "afraid" of such an airing.

"I trust my members to go out and project, in an open forum, in a conference committee process, to project what we feel is an appropriate budget," Skelos said. "Why are Senator Sampson and Speaker Silver afraid to put their members out in a conference committee process so we can have an open and frank discussion?"

It was this pressure, and the fact that Democrats have recently had trouble corralling the members of their conference for a party-line majority vote, that led to the agreement. (There are now 31 Democratic seats; a special election this week will fill the seat of ousted former Sen. Hiram Monserrate.)

"At this point, we're working through our committee process, and then the Speaker will be having conversations with the other leaders as the budget process continues," said Melissa Mansfield, a spokesman for Silver.

Paterson, who proposed his budget in January, used the inaction as an excuse to bash legislators during a radio interview Friday.

"I have put it out there, nobody else has," he said. "Everybody talks about what's distracting me. I don't know what's distracting everyone else because I'm exactly where I should be right now."