

Can the Pa. budget process be fixed?

HARRISBURG

Bob Strauss has an idea. Ideas are what you'd expect from an award-winning economist who teaches at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. But Strauss has hit at the heart of the problem in this year's state budget season and



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for taxpayers. If budget talks devolve into a black abyss. The potential is there for a cataclysmic budget breakdown along the lines of 1991, 2003 or 2009, the year of the 101-day impasse. Budget approval is due July 1.

Wolf's \$90 billion-plus budget and tax-shifting plan — which requires state income and sales tax hikes and business tax cuts and business tax reporting changes — essentially is a four-year task. It appears to be the agenda for Wolf's term. Republicans are not enamored of the

scope and of certain parts. Getting Democrat votes will not be easy. And here's the rub: Wolf, through his budget director, Randy Albright, delivered a message that the budget plan can't be cherry-picked. In other words, take it or leave it.

"It's actually the case that there's a world outside Pennsylvania," Strauss said. "One area is in New York and it's called Wall Street. We have been downgraded (in bonds) to the detriment of taxpayers." Strauss' concern is that the situation can only get worse if budget talks break down, as seems likely, and the constitutional deadline is blown.

So, take it or leave it? Let's find out now, Strauss says, not in July. Wolf's budget should be voted on in the House and Senate. It would go down. Then start negotiations from scratch, he says.

Strauss, who once worked as a congressional aide, believes it could be voted on a "voice vote," yea or nay. That would provide cover to nervous lawmakers who might not like it but don't really want to be on record against it. That might take some maneuvering, given the House uses an electronic voting board that records

each vote, the tally of which is provided to the public. The Senate votes individually by voice vote and it is also placed on the public record.

The efficiency Strauss is trying to achieve is understandable. He believes if they wanted to do it, they could. Maybe so. But it's difficult to agree with the notion of giving members "cover"; they should be on the record.

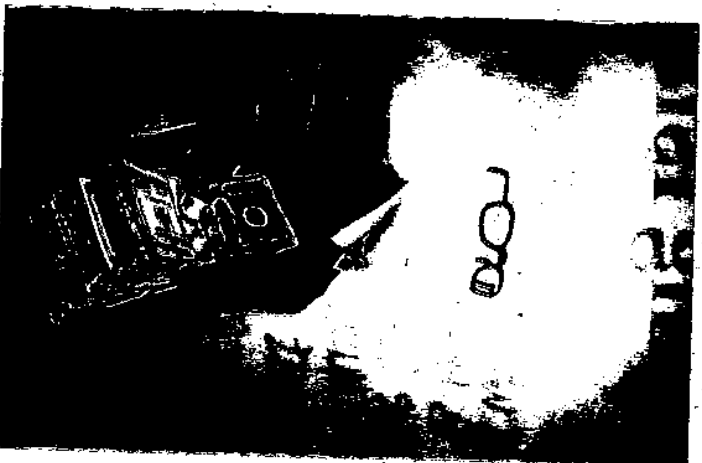
But, conceptually, Strauss is on to a way, perhaps, to turn the notion on its head and look at it differently.

Leaders have discussed holding a vote on the Wolf budget and the tax plan. At this point, it appears they are more likely to head down the traditional path of developing a House and Senate budget — versions that can be compared to Wolf's. The tax piece must be part of it.

Property tax relief is of major interest to the GOP but, on a dollar-for-dollar basis, not as a cover for raising taxes for more spending.

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