

Enclosure

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Louisiana lawmakers face budget tumult amid virus

BATON ROUGE — The Louisiana lawmakers who choose to show up Tuesday for a workday at the state Capitol will return to a political landscape reshaped by the coronavirus and to budget plans left in tatters by the state's worsening outbreak.

And they'll only be returning briefly.

With public health officials warning such gatherings are risky, lawmakers are planning to gavel in Tuesday, read in any bills they want to file before an evening deadline and head home again. No committee hearings are planned, and lawmakers may not be sitting at their desks amid recommended health guidelines about not getting too close.

"We're going to separate everybody in the chamber that comes," said House Speaker Clay Schexnayder, a Republican from Ascension Parish. "We'll have a few at their desks, and then we'll put people along the sides and let them raise their hands if they need to vote. We'll put people in the balcony if we need to."

Schexnayder said he and GOP Senate President Page Cortez agreed that after working Tuesday, the House and Senate will adjourn again until April 13, the day currently set for Gov. John Bel Edwards' "stay at home" order to lift. The Democratic governor has warned he could extend that order.

Schexnayder expected enough members will show up to conduct the one day of business — but he acknowledged Thursday that a weekend of steadily growing coronavirus case numbers in Louisiana could change minds.

“I had a member call me the other day and say, ‘I think it’s crazy for us to go up there,’” Schexnayder said. “Everybody plays it a little different. I’ve got some who are super worried and others who aren’t worried at all.”

Although most people recover and many suffer only mild symptoms, the COVID-19 disease caused by the coronavirus can cause serious illness including respiratory problems for some, such as the elderly and those with underlying medical conditions. The virus is highly contagious.

Tuesday is the last day the House and Senate can introduce bills for the regular session, under parameters in the Louisiana Constitution. Lawmakers likely will file catch-all proposals to respond to the pandemic’s impacts. The primary focus whenever lawmakers return for a longer stretch will be the struggle to craft a budget for the financial year that begins July 1.

How do you forecast the impacts of a global virus outbreak, the shutdown of large sectors of the national economy and an international feud further driving down oil prices?

Economists for the Edwards administration and the Legislature are working to model possible implications, and their financial analysts are combing through congressional aid bills to determine where federal assistance may fill some gaps. Louisiana’s state income forecasting panel is scheduled to meet April 8.

Tourism has dried up, along with the dollars tourists bring. Casinos are closed, with no winnings to be taxed. Tens of thousands in Louisiana have lost jobs, many state businesses are shuttered and people are staying away from restaurants and stores. All of that hits state income and sales tax collections. Oil prices have nosedived, lessening state income sources tied to oil exploration.

"Right now I don't have a prediction of what that's going to look like," Edwards said.

Federal aid flowing to the state and health care facilities could lessen some of the impact. For example, the governor said FEMA will cover 75 percent of the emergency response spending of state agencies, and the federal government is picking up a larger share of Medicaid costs because of the outbreak.

"I can't tell you that I'm unconcerned," Edwards said about the budget. "But right now, my biggest concern is this health emergency — and we are moving forward with everything we know we can and should do in order to deal with this emergency."

House Appropriations Chairman Jerome "Zee" Zeringue expects even with federal aid, Louisiana will have to make cuts.

Proposals to raise spending on teacher pay, college campuses and early learning centers could fall by the wayside.

"It's amazing. A month ago we were thinking about (the state income forecasting panel) coming back and recognizing additional money," said Zeringue, a Houma Republican. "We were all thinking this budget will be one of the unique ones where

we're actually working from a surplus and putting it to good use. God, how things have changed so quickly."

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