

## As budget deal nears, critics raise voices

**\$139 billion proposal bloated, some say; plan may be completed today**

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By **ROBERT T. GARRETT** / The Dallas Morning News

AUSTIN – Key lawmakers neared an end to the bartering over the state budget, but a political fight over its growth was just beginning Thursday.

Republican state leaders are being accused by both the left and the right of runaway spending, days before the proposed budget is even printed.

Five House and five Senate negotiators were expected to complete virtually all of their work by today on a blueprint for spending some \$139 billion in state and federal money over the next two years.

"We're real close," said Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, who presides over the Senate, citing differences over higher education spending.

Negotiators are likely to approve the bill next week – after it's printed. The budget would then go back to the House and the Senate for a vote by each. If approved, it would go to Gov. Rick Perry, who has line-item veto power.

As the 2006 governor's race approaches, state Democratic Party chairman Charles Soechting chided Mr. Perry and other Republicans for "record" increases in state spending.

"The era of tax-and-spend Republicans is upon us," he said.

Peggy Venable, director of Americans for Prosperity in Texas, a group advocating limited government, said her group plans to denounce the proposed budget as excessive.

"All that seems to be heard in the Capitol is how deals are being cut behind closed doors to jilt the taxpayers of Texas and leave them standing at the altar," she said.

And Michael Quinn Sullivan of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think tank, said: "Two years ago these lawmakers closed a \$10 billion shortfall through sound fiscal management. That same discipline does not seem to be in place today."

In recent days, Mr. Perry and his aides have voiced worries about the rate of growth in the budget, according to Republican lawmakers who run the budget committees. Mr. Perry's spokeswoman said the governor has expressed "concerns ... all session about spending."

Rep. Jim Pitts, R-Waxahachie, the House's budget chief, said growing student enrollments and Medicaid rolls have driven up costs.

Though the Senate's budget plan of \$139.3 billion called for a 10 percent spending increase, Mr. Dewhurst said it

would cover "essential services," not frills. "We have done a very good job ... of being very frugal with our dollars," he said.

Eva DeLuna Castro, budget analyst for the Center for Public Policy Priorities, which advocates more spending on schools and social programs and a state income tax, said Mr. Perry should defend the budget as necessary for a growing state.

"The governor's own budget proposed spending \$135 billion, so ... why is spending \$139 billion so different?" she said.

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