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“Based on what I’ve been hearing, the Senate bill will be substantially different,” said former Rep. Talmadge Heflin, R-Houston, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee in 2003, when the Legislature tackled a \$10 billion gap.

“They are likely to come up with more revenue,” said Heflin who now leads the Center for Fiscal Policy at the Austin-based think tank Texas Public Policy Foundation.

Eva DeLuna Castro, senior fiscal analyst at the Center for Public Policy Priorities, another Austin think-tank, said it is anyone’s guess how much the final budget bill will be before the session ends on May 30 because both chambers are billions of dollars apart in their respective bills.

For instance, the Senate bill would cut public education funding by only \$4 billion, which is half of the cuts in HB 1, DeLuna Castro noted.

Moreover, “there are small things here and there,” that a conference committee consisting of members of the two houses will have to work out before there is a budget bill for the entire Legislature to vote on, DeLuna Castro said.

Another factor that could change the budget bill before the entire Legislature votes on it is a report a Senate subcommittee that Sen. Robert Duncan chairs, is expected to release soon.

Two weeks ago when the Subcommittee on Fiscal Matters that the Lubbock Republican chairs was formed, the mission he and the six other members of the panel were given was clear: Identify an additional \$5 billion of non-tax revenue to offset a budget shortfall that could be as high as \$27 billion.

Duncan said before the House debated and voted on its budget bill that his subcommittee could make its findings public later this week.

In all, Senate Finance Committee chairman Steve Ogden, R-Bryan, said the House budget bill could take two weeks to get to the upper chamber because as of Monday his 15-member panel did not have the votes to approve it.

The House bills calls for deep cuts, especially in public education and social programs, so severe that even two House Republicans in the GOP-controlled lower chamber voted against it.

Another factor that might change the total in the budget bill before the Legislature adjourns in eight weeks is another revenue estimate that the lawmakers expect from State Comptroller Susan Combs in early May.

However, Heflin said the lawmakers should not raise their hopes too high because last month Combs said there was an additional \$300 million coming from increasing sales tax receipts.

“Even if she comes up with another \$300 it won’t be enough to make a huge difference in a budget of this size,” Heflin said.

And then there is tapping the state reserve fund — better known as the Rainy Day Fund — again.

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Although on Sunday House members voted not to use it again — like they did last Thursday to cover a gap of nearly \$4 billion for the current fiscal year ending on Aug. 31 — veteran lawmakers such as John Smithee, R-Amarillo, don't rule out using some of it for the 2012-13 budget before the session ends.

But others such as Rep. Warren Chisum, R-Pampa, said there is no point in tapping the \$8.2 billion fund again because Gov. Rick Perry has already said he would not sign a budget bill that includes Rainy Day Fund money.

Nonetheless, Price and others said if the proponents of tapping the fund again make a compelling argument, they would be willing to listen.

"My preference is not to use the fund for future expenses," Price said.

"But I am not going to ignore anybody's suggestions. My constituents feel very strong on both sides of the spectrum and if this becomes a big issue I am going to listen to both sides very carefully."

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