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State budget headed for vote



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Package totals \$88.7 billion, includes \$400 million for school safety, mental health.

TALLAHASSEE — Florida lawmakers are poised to vote on an \$88.7 billion state budget in overtime Sunday and end a 2018 session consumed by the shooting of 17 people at a Broward County high school.

The budget was finalized and released at 1:40 p.m. Thursday — starting the constitutionally required 72-hour waiting period before the House and Senate can vote on the spending plan, for the year beginning July 1.

The two-month session had been scheduled to end by midnight tonight.

But wrangling over hospital funding delayed a budget agreement, and legislative leaders now plan to extend the session until Sunday — although only a budget vote is anticipated over the weekend.

The budget includes \$400 million for school safety and mental health improvements prompted by the Valentine's Day shooting at Parkland's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

Lawmakers were able to add the money only after reducing by \$200 million the state's so-called "rainy day" fund reserve, leaving it at \$1 billion. Another \$404.3 million was pulled for a host of state trust funds allocated to other programs and projects — with cash taken from the affordable housing account amounting to almost half the sum.

Following the destruction of Hurricane Irma and the arrival of thousands of Puerto Rican residents after Hurricane Maria, lawmakers had vowed to increase money available for apartments and lower-cost housing, but the Parkland response changed that and many other spending priorities.

For Florida's 2.8 million school children, lawmakers will increase per-pupil spending by \$101, about half the amount Gov. Rick Scott proposed last fall. It's just over a 1 percent increase, bringing per-pupil spending to \$7,408.

Lawmakers, however, looked set to approve \$168 million in tax breaks — an election-year package that earlier looked likely to be dramatically scaled back.

Instead, the proposal includes sales-tax holidays for back-to-school and hurricane supplies and several business and farm tax cuts.

Florida Supreme Court justices would receive a 36 percent pay raise in the new state budget, which would provide \$58,400 raises for the seven justices on the state's highest court, increasing their salaries to \$220,600.

Lawmakers said a factor in the raise is that three vacancies will have to be filled in January as longtime justices Barbara Pariente, R. Fred Lewis and Peggy Quince leave the bench because of a mandatory retirement age.

Other judges also would be in line for raises. Members of the state's five appellate courts would see their annual salaries rise by 10 percent to \$169,554.

Salaries for circuit-court judges would increase by 10 percent to \$160,688, and county judges would receive \$151,822, reflecting a 10 percent raise.

State attorneys and public defenders would also receive 10 percent raises for a new annual salary of \$169,554. Assistant state attorneys and assistant public defenders would receive \$2,000 pay raises or \$4,000, if they have more than three years of service.

The new budget does not include a general pay raise for state employees, but it would provide a 7 percent pay hike for law-enforcement officers working in various state agencies including the Florida Highway Patrol, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. The increase would be 10 percent for officers with more than 10 years of service.

State firefighters would receive \$2,500 pay raises in the new year. Probation and detention officers in the Department of Juvenile Justice would receive a 10 percent pay raise. Probation officers in the Department of Corrections would receive a \$1,500 pay raise.

Nursing homes will get a \$130 million bump in Medicaid payments, and residents who live in the facilities will get nearly a 25 percent increase in a monthly stipend they can use for personal needs.

During the upcoming year, the state would spend \$37.1 billion across six state health-care and social-service agencies. The Agency for Health Care Administration, which houses Florida's Medicaid program, would get the majority of the funding, accounting for \$29.2 billion in spending during the fiscal year starting July 1. The Department of Children and Families is the second largest agency, accounting for \$1.7 billion.

Senate Appropriations Chairman Rob Bradley said the personal allowance for nursing home-residents has long been a priority of senators, and this year's budget increases the amount from \$105 to \$130.

This report includes material from the News Service of Florida.