Editorial: Is state moving toward an all-cuts Armageddon?

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California can't afford to take any more off-ramps on the road to economic recovery.

One of the biggest would be another extended budget impasse that harms state contractors, threatens to shut down more bond-funded construction projects and sends a message that California is perpetually ungovernable.

Despite the stakes, the prospects of a budget breakthrough on Gov. Jerry Brown's proposal are bleak, and getting bleaker.

Based on recent surveys, most Californians support his plan to close the $26.6 billion deficit through a mixture of cuts and a special election to extend tax increases. But Republicans are balking at many of the cuts and are refusing to provide votes to place the taxes on a special election ballot.

That is forcing the governor to come up with a Plan B.

One option would be to attempt an end-around on the two-thirds vote requirement. The legislative counsel has said lawmakers can place tax proposals on the ballot with a majority vote if the measures change but are consistent with the "scope or effect" of statutory tax initiatives already passed by voters.

Yet in all likelihood, the proposed tax extension wouldn't meet this "scope and effect" test and would meet fierce opposition from business groups. As Assembly Speaker John A. Pérez said earlier this month, "There is not a single legal analysis that I think holds any water that says we could legitimately put this question before voters on a simple majority vote."

Brown's other alternative could rightly be called the Armageddon option – an all-cuts budget.

Such cuts would fall largely on public education and those in desperate circumstances, such as the poor and disabled. Already, those dependent on social services have taken disproportionate hits. State funding for the University of California, the CSU system and community colleges would be severely reduced, forcing more tuition increases. That could also lead to the admission of even more out-of-state students, who pay more but take spaces away from California residents.

It is hard to imagine that Californians would accept an all-cuts budget, once they were aware of the consequences. With that in mind, Brown is considering placing an initiative on the November
ballot that would allow voters to vote for a tax extension and head off the worst of the worst cuts, according to a report Tuesday by The Bee's Capitol Alert.

All he'd need would be signatures from voters, not votes from recalcitrant Republican lawmakers, to get this plan on the ballot.

The Armageddon option is a last resort and clearly not one that Brown – or any Californian – would embrace with any passion. It would inflict real pain, with no guarantee that voters would restore cuts in November.

It also would further widen the partisan divisions in California, creating more offramps on the road to recovery.

That's why the state's best option lies with reconciliation and redeclaration to the state's best interests. Members of both parties need to recognize the stakes involved and cut a deal that would allow voters in June to decide the fate of the budget.

"I don't see this as a Republican or a Democratic issue," Brown said Sunday in a YouTube video. "This is a matter of all of us thinking as Californians first and acting in solidarity to grapple with problems that have been avoided too long."

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