Editorial: Budget resolution is more bitter than sweet

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Judged purely on the straitjacket they've been forced to wear, Democrats were on their way Tuesday toward making the best of some bad budget choices.

Yet judged on California's needs and ambitions, there isn't much to celebrate. Our standing as a state that invests in its future and protects its most vulnerable is about to take a horrible beating.

It could have turned out differently. Republicans and Democrats could have found common ground on a combination of spending cuts, budget reforms and tax extensions. They could have acted like true public servants.

Yet all the posturing and no-tax pledges and pressure from vested interests poisoned whatever common ground might have existed. This week, Gov. Jerry Brown and his party decided there was no deal to be cut with GOP lawmakers, whose votes were needed for tax extensions. So Democrats came up with a Plan B that cut the minority out of the action. Republicans gained nothing – no pension reforms, no regulatory reforms, no spending cap – even though their constituents will share in the pain.

It is ugliness heaped upon ugliness. More cuts to higher education, driving up tuition costs. More cuts to Healthy Families. Less help for children whose parents are trying to find jobs. Less help for the developmentally disabled. More cuts to the judiciary. The list goes on and on.

It is easy to make jokes about the $4 billion in extra revenues that Democrats hope will arrive, and it could well be optimistic. But it isn't as if Democrats don't have a backup plan. Should the revenue not materialize, they've laid out more cuts to universities, social services, public safety and other programs. That's not a Harry Potter piece of wizardry, as Republican Sen. Bob Huff characterized it. It is contingency planning – forced upon Democrats by GOP ideologues who would not even let the electorate decide the fate of tax extensions.

Although Republican leaders bemoan the lack of structural reform in this budget proposal, it actually includes some, even if it could have included more.

Democrats are standing behind Gov. Brown's efforts to dismantle redevelopment agencies and the money they siphon from the tax rolls. They voted to realign state finances so local agencies could handle more low-risk offenders, reducing overcrowding and costs to state prisons. And they voted to require online retailers such as Amazon to collect sales taxes, which is only fair.
While litigation could stall some or all of these measures, they were the right thing to do, and Democratic leaders had to twist arms to get the vote to get them passed. Soon Californians can sit back and watch businesses that previously reaped windfalls from redevelopment and lax tax laws put their money – our money – into lawsuits.

There is no excusing the process that produced this budget. Months of closed-door sessions between Republicans and Democrats made it difficult, if not impossible, to assess whether either side was negotiating in good faith. In the end, Democrats whipped out a set of budget bills and sent them to a vote before anyone could fully vet them.

More than ever, this budget highlights the need for reform – a two-year planning cycle, a true rainy-day fund, transparency in vetting the budget and an end to the two-thirds vote rule to raise taxes. We can't keep going down this road.

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