So does California have a new state budget, or not?

It has about a half-a-budget, or perhaps more accurately, a half-baked budget.

The Legislature passed a budget bill last Friday, thus meeting the constitutional deadline and also preserving lawmakers' salaries, along with a handful of minor "trailer bills" to implement its provisions.

However, the budget bill also requires Gov. Jerry Brown's signature, and he has until June 27 to sign or, as he did last year, veto it.

There's also a flock of other trailer bills still pending, including those that involve Brown's dispute with his fellow Democrats in the Legislature over health and welfare services.

The Democrats would spend roughly a billion dollars more on those services than Brown insists he wants, covering the extra spending by slashing the budget's emergency reserve in half and adopting some rosy revenue assumptions.

Whether the intraparty conflict is genuine, or is merely a bit of political theater to portray Brown as being tough with the voting public's bucks, is at least debatable.

Certainly, the governor has been trying mightily to create an image of frugality to persuade voters to pass his sales and income tax hike next November.

Speaking of which, Brown has about three weeks until the deadline for his tax measure to qualify for the ballot and there's at least a small doubt that the signature-sampling now under way will be successful.

If it isn't, all bets are off.
At the moment, therefore, the state has just enough of a budget for legislators to keep their paychecks flowing, but not enough of one to actually function when the 2012-13 fiscal year begins July 1.

How it turns out is anyone's guess.

Having publicly drawn a line in the sand on maintaining health and welfare benefits for the young, the poor, the aged and the disabled, the Legislature's Democratic leadership could hardly acquiesce to Brown's demands for major and permanent reductions without looking weak.

However, the Legislature's public approval rating is already at rock bottom, so its leaders might be willing to take a dive if it would boost Brown's chances of winning the tax election.

Were they to cave, though, the programs' recipients and advocates, including unionized service providers, would probably march on the Capitol.

The flip side, of course, is that were Brown to retreat on the safety net cuts, he would be pilloried by opponents of new taxes as talking a good game on fiscal responsibility but not walking the talk.

There's always the possibility, or maybe a probability, of some deal that would save face by postponing the conflict until another day.

The only certainties are that the Democrats own whatever budget decisions are made, for better or worse, and that they can't wait forever to make them.

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