

Chico Enterprise Record

Legislators need kick in the pants

Friday, January 28, 2005 -

Rick Keene wants the Legislature to do its job on time. Hallelujah.

We've been complaining for years about the late state budgets. The fiscal year starts July 1, but the state government routinely begins the year without a budget in place meaning the government is spending money, but has no idea how much it should be spending.

The indecision trickles down to city and county government, school districts and special districts, which all start the fiscal year without an accurate budget because they are reliant on state funding.

The Constitution says legislators must agree to a budget by June 15 and the governor must sign it by June 30. The state government has missed its June 30 deadline 18 of the past 26 years. Legislators haven't met their June 15 deadline since 1986.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger outlined four key initiatives in his State of the State address earlier this month. One was to mandate budgets that are completed on time.

Enter Keene, a Republican assemblyman from Chico. A governor can't introduce bills, so Keene did so on Schwarzenegger's behalf last Friday.

And in typical legislative fashion, the bill hasn't been assigned or discussed.

Keene's bill is the fifth in a line of Assembly Constitutional Amendment bills that, at Schwarzenegger's urging, were introduced as long as three weeks ago. All of the bills are stalled because they need committee assignments. That's the job of the Democrats, who hold the legislative majority.

Keene is frustrated by the stalling. He stood in front of the Assembly on Thursday morning and asked why the bills haven't been assigned to committees. He was told that the Democratic leadership wants to concentrate on next year's budget, not Schwarzenegger's reform proposals. Indeed, the budget discussions that started Wednesday were the earliest we've seen from the Legislature in years. But it wouldn't take much effort to assign the five constitutional amendments to committees for study and public hearings.

"We should get it out there and vote it up or down," said Keene. "... Have a hearing and let people make their statements and opinions."

The way Keene sees it, his bill will end up being decided by voters anyway, since voters must approve all state constitutional amendments. If the Legislature doesn't pass the bill, Schwarzenegger has vowed to hit the road in March and gather signatures to put his initiatives on the ballot. He has until June 15 to call a special election, which most likely would occur Nov. 8.

Keene's bill would provide an incentive for legislators to complete their budget work by June 15. The alternative is ugly. If legislators don't do their work, across-the-board cuts would occur in all programs and departments until revenues equal expenses.

We don't like the idea of across-the-board cuts, and neither do legislators. Some programs simply should not be cut.

"It's designed to be draconian and terrible, because it's designed to be an incentive for us to do our jobs," said Keene. "It will keep people at the table until they come up with solutions."

Right now, there is little incentive for legislators to produce a budget that's on time. They need a little kick in the pants. Or a big kick in the pants. The threat of taking away their decision-making power is an unfortunate solution, but as their track record shows, it's sorely needed.