

Speaker in hot seat as Democrats debate California budget

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Minutes after becoming Assembly leader last year, Karen Bass laughed when asked how long she expected the honeymoon to last.

"I think it's probably about over," the Los Angeles Democrat joked.

She's not smiling now.

Bass sits squarely in the hot seat of an angry Democratic caucus that doesn't have its own plan for bridging the state's \$24.3 billion budget gap and doesn't support Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposal.

Interviews with a half-dozen Assembly Democrats, from party liberals to moderates, reveal a frustrated caucus thrashing about behind closed doors, often loudly, for consensus on fixing the budget.

The 50-member caucus is split on how deeply to cut health, welfare and social service programs, how strongly to demand revenue-raising measures – and which taxes, fees or "creative" mechanisms to target for more funds.

Adding to the tension, California's coffers are expected to run dry next month without a budget deal. Bass also is operating in a vortex of special-interest pressure and colleagues jockeying to replace her when she is termed out next year.

Assemblyman Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, conceded that the caucus feels a "huge amount of angst and pressure" over the state's massive shortfall. But the long hours of raucous debate are vital, and Bass remains firmly in charge, he said.

"Is her leadership threatened? Absolutely not," Huffman said.

"The fact that we're able to talk openly within our caucus, which hasn't always been the case, is I think a healthy thing," he said.

Privately, some lawmakers see the sessions differently, calling them all talk, little action. The caucus, they say, has been rudderless in channeling proposals into a cohesive budget-balancing, revenue-raising plan that saves key programs.

Some said there are other concerns as well, including fallout over the controversial budget deal struck in February and the subsequent failure of five related measures on last month's ballot.

Bass stumbled on a different issue recently, some say, by granting 5 percent pay increases to more than 120 staff members of the Democratic and GOP leadership caucuses, then canceling them after they were disclosed by the media.

None of the lawmakers interviewed, however, said that a coup is imminent.

Bass said criticism doesn't bother her, that it's typical inside the Capitol in June, when budget battles burn hot.

"I take none of it seriously at all," she said. "I think my caucus is very engaged. We've had long meetings because we've been going into details. ... I do not believe there's some big strife going on in the caucus."

A former community organizer, the speaker lets everyone have their say.

"But with (50) people and 40 of them wanting to speak on every point, it takes time," Bass said.

Dan Schnur, director of the Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics at the University of Southern California, said he is "not in the slightest" surprised by grumblings of discontent.

"There's no politically palatable way to solve a \$24 billion budget deficit," Schnur said. "And to legislative leaders who have to balance ideological leanings of their members with their broader responsibility to the state and its survival, it's an almost unsolvable situation," he said.

Assemblyman Jim Beall, D-San Jose, said crisis always spawns criticism.

"My basic message to (complainers) is: Shut up and get to work. Let's get this budget figured out."

Assemblyman Sandré Swanson, D-Alameda, said caucuses can appear messy as one lawmaker after another, hour after hour, vent concerns.

"I don't think they're frustrated with the speaker, I think they're frustrated with the situation," Swanson said.

Bass said she understands why colleagues could be upset.

"As Democrats, we came up here to protect the most vulnerable Californians," she said.

"Everybody is very traumatized by the depth of the recession, the cash problem, the fact that we have such limited time and such few alternatives."

Bass vowed that the marathon Democratic caucuses ultimately will bear fruit: Revenue-raising measures will be identified, proposed and pushed in budget negotiations.

"There has to be revenue," she said.

Democrats in the Assembly and Senate vow to save key public services, including the state's primary welfare program, health insurance covering 900,000 low-income children, Cal Grants' financial aid for college, HIV/AIDS programs, and in-home support services for the frail elderly.

But Bass and Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg appear to be split somewhat on strategy. Steinberg has proposed avoiding such cuts next year by raiding a projected \$4.5 billion reserve fund, while Bass said that the budget cannot be balanced without more revenue and that the Assembly is weighing options.

Steinberg said the difference is not substantial: Both approaches recognize that vital cuts to vulnerable residents cannot be tolerated and that a fiscal gap must be bridged to save them.

"We're in the same place when it comes to the end game," he said.