In two distinct moves toward adjournment of the Iowa legislature despite a lack of agreement, Statehouse Republicans on Tuesday decided upon the size of the budget pie while the Democratic-led Senate pushed ahead with what's usually the final bill of the year before adjourning for the week.

"This starts our movement to hopefully adjourn the session," said Senate Appropriations Chair Bob Dvorsky (D-Coralville). "We don't have any more bills to do anything with."

Iowa's state general-fund budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1 will be less than $6 billion, according to an agreement reached Tuesday by Republicans in the Iowa House and Senate and Governor Terry Branstad.

The move represents one step toward agreement and eventual adjournment of the 2011 legislative session. However, no Democrats were at the table in determining the size of the budget pie, and they control the Iowa Senate.

Iowa hasn't had a budget of less than $6 billion since Fiscal Year 2008. The amount would be less than the $6.16 billion proposed by Branstad and $6.38 billion proposed by Senate Democrats, but slightly more than the $5.90 billion proposed by House Republicans. No further specifics were provided.

"Republicans are committed to funding Iowans' priorities while reducing the size, scope, and cost of government," said House Speaker Kraig Paulsen (R-Hiawatha). "This budget spends less than the state takes in and gives taxpayers a seat at the table."

Meanwhile, the Iowa Senate on Tuesday debated and approved by a 26-20 vote the all-encompassing standings budget, a bill that generally includes everything but the kitchen sink and signals that the end of the legislative session is near.

Senate File 533 outlines state money for education, state salaries, and property-tax credits. The

bill spends a total of $2.9 billion, which is $27.2 million less than what would have been spent in the general fund without the bill because “standings” money is re-occurring and the bill contains some new caps on spending.

The vast majority of money in the bill would be for education. A total of $2.7 billion is appropriated for basic state aid for schools.

This year, Senate Democrats have included in the standings bill two of their priorities: a 2-percent allowable growth in school funding at a cost of $64.5 million, and an increase in the earned-income tax credit from 7 to 10 percent. The latter was previously vetoed by Branstad in another bill.

But agreement has yet to be reached in those areas, leading some Republicans to speculate that Democrats will “dump and run” – adjourn the legislative session despite no agreement on key issues.

The “standings” budget bill is often a catchall bill for issues that didn’t make it earlier in the legislative session.

Twenty-two amendments were offered on the bill Tuesday on the Senate floor, including ones dealing with domestic abuse, red-light cameras, and school dress codes. But Senate President Jack Kibbie (D-Emmetsburg) resisted adding the policy pieces to the budget bill.

“It’s interesting to get all these bills that dropped off along the way,” Kibbie commented after rejecting debate of the red-light-camera amendment. “Even though we’ve got a broad bill before us with this standings bill, we’ve got a bill that’s narrower than what this amendment is. I don’t believe this amendment fits into this bill.”

Gambling Bill Averts Smoking Amendment, Sent to the Governor

For about 40 minutes Tuesday, the wheels appeared to fall off what most in the legislature described as the “non-controversial gambling bill.”

The political waters became choppy when House Speaker Paulsen allowed debate on an amendment that would require casinos to be smoke-free if they want to avoid future referendums on their gambling licenses.

But things eventually came together.

Senate File 526 will now go down to Branstad as one of the few non-controversial gambling bills in Iowa history. The House voted 75-21 Tuesday to approve the bill with very little debate, despite the issue of gambling traditionally opening up a can of worms in the Iowa legislature.

The bill calls for two state reports on Internet poker; says casinos that have successfully passed two referendums would no longer be subject to future votes of the people every eight years on their gambling licenses; and allows Iowans to make advance deposits so they can place online or telephone bets on live horse races, as is done in 20 other states.

It also struck what had been an elusive compromise on horse purses and moved standardbred racing to county fairs.

“Senate File 526 does not expand gambling in Iowa and allows the industry to operate more effectively and more efficiently,” said Representative Peter Cownie (R-West Des Moines), the bill’s floor manager. “I hope that is something that the legislature should always be in the business of.”

The uncertainty came when Representative Janet Petersen (D-Des Moines) offered an amendment that would have added another condition if casinos wanted to avoid facing a vote of the people in the future: They’d have to be 100 percent smoke-free.

“When we passed the Smokefree Air Act of 2008, one group of employees that was left out of protection from the secondhand smoke is those people who work in casinos,” Petersen said. “This would give them an opportunity to work in a smoke-free environment.”

Cownie called for a ruling on whether the amendment was germane to the bill. The broader issue of expanding the state smoking ban to casino floors was ruled not germane to the bill in both the House and Senate.

But Petersen’s amendment linked the smoking issue to the referendum issue. Paulsen ruled that the amendment was germane to the bill and eligible for debate. That sent Democrats into a closed-door caucus for about 40 minutes to develop a strategy for their next move.

When they emerged, Petersen’s amendment was rejected on a voice vote, despite several Democrats supporting the amendment.

Democrats did not call for a division or a record on the vote. That means there is no formal record of how individual lawmakers voted on whether casinos should be smoke-free if they want to avoid future referendums.

This summary was compiled from reports by IowaPolitics.com .