

Iowa Republican Leader Vows to Prevent Government Shutdown

Written by Lynn Campbell
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The 2011 session of the Iowa legislature will go on for weeks if not months, Senate Majority Leader Mike Gronstal said Thursday.

“This is going to take a while,” said Gronstal (D-Council Bluffs).

A budget agreement between Republican Governor Terry Branstad, the Republican-controlled House, and the Democrat-led Senate is needed by June 30, the end of the fiscal year, to avert a government shutdown. House Speaker Kraig Paulsen predicted that an agreement would be reached by then.

“House Republicans are not going to let government shut down,” said Paulsen (R-Hiawatha). “I think that would be unacceptable.”

This year’s situation is similar to one in 1992, when Branstad, who also was governor at that time, and the Democrat-controlled legislature were also deadlocked on the state budget and tax policy. A compromise was eventually reached on June 25, in a second special session.

Gronstal on Thursday blasted the governor for waiting until the end of the legislative session to change the target amount that the state plans to spend next fiscal year from \$6.16 billion to

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nearly \$6.00 billion.

“Our governor comes back to the table on the 114th day of the session, and decided to change his budget, dramatically lowering the resources that he is going to agree to spend for next year’s education, health-care, and job-creation efforts in this state,” Gronstal said. “We think this is a gut-punch to the middle class. We think it is wrong, and we are going to continue to fight for what is important out there.”

He was referring to an agreement this week between Branstad and Republicans from both the Iowa House and Senate to spend just less than \$6 billion in the fiscal year that begins July 1. Gronstal characterized the GOP agreement as decreasing state spending by \$161 million and changing the parameters of the deal that’s been worked on since the beginning of the session in January.

“Rather than moving closer together a week after we’re supposed to adjourn, the Republicans and the governor are moving further apart,” Gronstal said. “Changing the deal at the end of the game, and changing it downward when all of the indicators are that things are getting better in the state of Iowa, ... seems pretty ridiculous to me. It seems more a political game than a governing game.”

In an interview with IowaPolitics.com, Branstad defended the new budget target as a move aimed at fiscal responsibility, which he said is why he was re-elected governor. He also acknowledged that the Iowa legislature is still a ways from wrapping up.

“It’s just beginning,” he said. “There’s a lot of work to do. I think it’s going to take a lot of patience and perseverance. But I think it’s critically important that we not forget what we were elected to do: correct the financial mess, stop the political games, make sure that we have an open, transparent process, and [that] we make the best decisions. We need to make sure that the decisions we make are not short-term, but [that] we restore stability and predictability and make sure that what we’re doing is sustainable for the long term.”

Paulsen agreed with Senate Democrats that negotiations weren’t going well.

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“This week, we probably took a step backwards, collectively, towards reaching agreement,” he said.

But the House Republican leader disagreed on who is to blame. He said with the new target of spending up to \$6 billion, House Republicans did their share of compromising by agreeing to spend up to \$101 million more than they originally proposed.

“Senator Gronstal likes to talk about olive branches,” Paulsen said. “I think we brought the whole tree.”

House Republicans originally proposed a \$5.90-billion budget, while the governor proposed \$6.16 billion and Senate Democrats proposed \$6.38 billion.

Paulsen said it isn't a good sign that Senate Democrats this week voted to increase spending by \$100 million more than originally proposed in a catch-all “standings” budget bill that contains spending for education, property-tax credits, and state salaries.

“If that's the direction they're planning on moving, then yeah, it's going to be difficult to come to some sort of conclusion,” Paulsen said. “That's basically what's happened this week: They decided they wanted to spend more money, which is not terribly surprising.”

House Republicans worked to do damage control Thursday after reports that their budget subcommittee chairs are nervous about a two-year budget advocated by Branstad. House Appropriations Chair Scott Raecker (R-Urbandale) issued a statement saying, “Make no mistake: House Republicans are supportive of a two-year budget.”

Branstad said House Republicans have concerns about a governor using authority to transfer money within the state budget. He said he has worked to ease those concerns.

“I've made it clear: I don't want these abuses of the executive or the legislature,” he said. “I'm

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committed to correcting the financial mismanagement and the abuses that have occurred. So I not only want a biennial budget; I support restricting the use of transfer authority to only emergency situations when the legislature is not in session.”

Branstad, meanwhile, hinted Thursday there is room to compromise on school funding. Branstad and House Republicans have advocated for 0-percent growth, while Democrats have advocated for a 2-percent increase above this year’s appropriation. The governor suggested Thursday that 1 percent is possible.

The Iowa Capitol was largely empty Thursday, aside from school groups taking tours. Rank-and-file lawmakers from both the House and Senate were sent home early this week and put on call. Legislative leaders said they didn’t plan to bring their members back next week unless there was something to do.

“There’s no reason to bring people back until we have bills ready to move,” said House Majority Leader Linda Upmeyer (R-Garner). “Our members are all on call. Anybody that’s working is part of the negotiations, appropriations.”

Democrats unhappy with Statehouse negotiations can’t truly choose to “dump and run,” or adjourn for the year without a compromise, as some Republicans have suggested. The Iowa Constitution says the legislature can’t adjourn for the year until both chambers agree to do so. If one chamber adjourns but the other doesn’t within four days, the original chamber is automatically called back into session.

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