

# Legislators express frustration after session

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2018  
Budget  
Session

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Rep. Scott Clem for Wyoming House District 31 Some local state lawmakers say the Legislature didn't rein in overspending in its recently completed 22-day budget session.

As a result, Rep. Tim Hallinan, R-Gillette, said the Legislature "failed" in its 2018 session. His comments came during the annual Campbell County Chamber of Commerce's legislative wrap-up breakfast Thursday.

Other legislators talked about understanding the many "coffee cans" holding money and savings accounts to operate the Wyoming budget and how complicated the system is.

What's obvious is that while many non-budget issues were dealt with over those 22 days, budget matters were — and still remain — the focus of lawmakers.

The discussion came as legislators fielded questions about "kicking the can down the road" in cutting spending and major K-12 education funding issues statewide.

"It's fair to say we're kicking the can," said Rep. Eric Barlow, R-Gillette. "But folks, at least we have a can to kick."

Failed as a Legislature?

Hallinan said lawmakers failed to override Gov. Matt Mead's veto of the Joint Appropriations Committee's recommendation to reduce the number of state employees by 50 over the next two years.

That wouldn't mean firing people, not just refilling positions vacated by retirement, he said. But the Legislature fell seven votes short of overriding the veto.

"That's another item that shows people were not serious about the budget," he said. "It was a budget session, and here was a bill dealing with the overspending that the state government has and we did not do that, so we failed."

Hallinan said the Legislature balanced the budget without increasing taxes. But it also took \$688 million from savings to pay for state operations.

“I would say that we failed as a Legislature,” Hallinan said.

A brighter view

While Rep. Scott Clem agreed with his colleague, he chose instead to focus on some of the positive accomplishments of lawmakers Thursday.

The Republican said several measures from the Labor and Health Committee were passed, thanks to the leadership of Barlow.

Legislators also solved the school capital construction problem by using interest from trust funds to help pay for the work over the next two years since the state was out of coal lease bonus money for that purpose.

Legislators passed a “stand your ground” bill, restored the Wyoming Children’s Trust Fund that ended in 2016 after 35 years, restored suicide prevention funding throughout the state and increased rates paid for the disabled, he said.

“That’s a great win, not only for Campbell County, but all of Wyoming,” Clem said.

Finally, he mentioned the blockchain technology legislation that was approved.

“It’s more than just bitcoin. Wyoming was one of the three worst states for blockchain technology,” he said. “Now we’re among the best in the nation or even the world. It opens up a lot of opportunities.”

While “there was a lot of frustration” in the budget session, Clem said there also were a lot of good things that happened.

School construction

Sen. Jeff Wasserburger, R-Gillette, said he isn’t so sure the Legislature has solved the school construction funding issue.

“After a year’s time, we’ll see how much money we’ll tap into those accounts,” he said.

The Legislature chose to dip into some of its savings accounts to deal with the issue, he said. “The question to me is whether or not it solves school capcon (capital construction) and major maintenance issues.”

Both Clem and Wasserburger are right, Barlow said. He said the larger issue is understanding Wyoming’s complicated money management system.

There are so many “coffee cans” or accounts to deal with shoring up funding that’s it’s too difficult for most legislators to understand, he said.

He pointed out that legislators only get five days during the 22-day session to deal with the state’s operational budget.

“My goal, and it should be all of our goals, ... is to take a hard look at our funding,” he said. “It is tough. It is extremely tough.”

“There is money available for capital construction of schools. It confuses us because we have hundreds of accounts where all the money has to come in,” Hallinan said.

“I think we have problems because we have 50 or more of these cans. I think it’s ridiculous,” he said. “It’s almost impossible for your legislators to understand. That’s how bad it is.”

Clem said legislators agreed to fund school capital construction for the next two years by using five funds totaling \$185 million.

“It’s funded for the next two years, but after that ...” he said. It’s also guaranteed because it’s being backed up, if necessary, by money from the permanent mineral trust fund.

“I would argue that we did solve it.