

Both parties racing toward budgetary partisanship

by Paul E. Kostyu

COLUMBUS, Ohio - The next several months will tell us just how well the Republican-controlled Legislature will get along with Ohio Democratic Gov. Ted Strickland. If you're a betting person, go with the horse named "NotVeryWell."

From now until July 1, politicians will be dickering over the state budget which Strickland rolled out on March 15 or 20, depending on what side of the political aisle you're on. The parties can't even agree on that. The first date represents the day the administration publicly released the so-called "Blue Book," called that because in the past the budget was released in paper form and had, well, a blue cover.

Now, the budget is rolled out via computer, but it's still called the Blue Book. The law requires the budget to be ready by March 15 and, according to Democrats, they met the deadline.

The second date represents the day the Legislative Service Commission, which is responsible for drafting all legislation, had the Blue Book in legislative form as House Bill 119. This is the actual document from which lawmakers work as they examine the specifics about where the governor plans to collect and spend the state's money. It's divided into sections and sent to various committees and subcommittees for hearings. Republicans complained Strickland was late meeting the March 15 deadline because they didn't have this version of the budget.

Republicans have had problems trying to find something negative to pin on the governor. They complained mightily about the late budget, for example, until a Columbus Dispatch story pointed out that former Govs. Richard Celeste, a Democrat, and Republicans George Voinovich and Bob Taft were all late with their budgets in their first year in office. Oops.

Republicans complained about Strickland retrieving Senate Bill 117 from late last year and vetoing it. They contend the bill, which included a cap on non-economic damages in consumer lawsuits, was already law. Then we come to find Republicans regularly retrieved bills that had become law, even those with Taft's signature, to make changes. Oops.

Strickland has not had a major misstep, yet, in the young tenure of his administration, but give him time. In the meantime, Republicans are frustrated.

Here's their problem: Strickland is widely popular. Until he came into office, Republican legislative leaders pretty much could do anything they wanted because the public so disliked Taft. At the same time, Democrats didn't have much, if any, clout. Things have changed, however.

The latest poll released by the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute shows Strickland gaining popularity. He's gone from a 45 percent approval rating on Feb. 1 to 53 percent last week. His disapproval rating was 12 percent both times. Meanwhile, the General Assembly's approval rate inched up from 35 to 38 percent.

Strickland's popularity could play against Republicans as they pick away at things in the budget they don't like. The governor promised to tackle the state's many problems and Ohioans might think he's made a start through his budget. If Republicans are seen as obstructionists to that effort, then voters could decide more changes are needed to the political landscape in Columbus come 2008.

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