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## COLUMNIST

# State Budget: Record Spending and Record Embarrassment

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The fiscal 2024 state budget signed by Gov. Phil Murphy established two records: First, at \$54.3 billion it is the largest in state history (<https://www.insidernj.com/home-of-the-whopper-nj-assembly-approves-54-3-billion-budget/>), and second for the level of embarrassment the Legislature brought on itself and the environment of governmental disfunction it created in the process.

Despite having the governor's budget recommendation in hand for four months, it came down to a chaotic last-minute stampede (<https://www.njspotlightnews.org/video/legislature-passes-historic-54-3b-budget/>) to secure committee approval, even though the proposed budget wasn't available, and to meet the deadline for approving it and sending it to Murphy's desk.

He signed it (<https://www.insidernj.com/murphy-signs-the-2024-budget/>) little more than three hours before the constitutionally mandated July 1 deadline for a budget to be in place and head off a government shutdown.

History bears out the validity of the theory that a budget is 10 percent a fiscal document and 90 percent a political one. It is, at its most fundamental, a statement of principles, a recitation of governing philosophy, and an agenda-driven set of priorities.

This year, however, the legislative leadership co-opted the 10 percent and produced a spending plan seven percent greater than the fiscal year just concluded, driven according to critics by the imperative to preserve and enhance the Democratic majorities —46-34 in the Assembly and 25-15 in the Senate — in the legislative election four months off.

Forcing hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars through committee at the eleventh hour without debate or public disclosure how the funds were allocated or at whose request reinforced the notion that political expediency, partisan advantage and private interest pressures were the motivators.

The budget process has always been open to the inclusion of funds for targeted projects at the behest of legislators and local officials seeking state aid rather than place the burden on property taxpayers.

Generally, such requests are dealt with during the committee debate and deliberations open to the public and the media, a process seemingly ignored this year until the time crunch was upon it.

Despite the lack of printed copies of the proposals, the committee votes were taken in a mad scramble to act before the time deadline to bring the budget to a floor vote.

Republicans as well as outside observers quickly and not surprisingly accused Democrats of deliberately concealing the additional spending and, more to the political point, who requested it and where was it directed.

Were, for instance, projects singled out for funding in legislative districts where Democratic incumbents were at risk and facing well-funded challengers?

Were the projects worth the cost or simply an opportunity for the incumbent Democrat to tout his or her success in securing state aid?

Was keeping Republican legislators and the public in the dark part of an overall campaign strategy to build a firewall to prevent losing six Senate seats and seven Assembly seats and falling into the minority?

Traditionally elections in which legislative contests lead the ballot — the case this year — voter turnout is well below average, difficult to predict and thus worrisome to incumbents. In this context, seeking an edge in the form of state funding for local programs or projects is understandable.

The Democratic leadership acknowledged that flaws and errors occurred and promised corrective legislation would be considered at subsequent sessions. With the summer recess at hand and campaigns on the horizon, the prospect of returning to Trenton for cleanup activity is exceedingly dim.

With the governor's signature, the pressure for publicly justifying the last-minute budget deal-making has been eased.

Murphy and the Democratic leadership established the narrative, praising one another for a budget which increases state aid to school districts, continues full payments into the public pension fund, increases the child tax credit and expands property tax relief program eligibility.

It was left to budget committee chairman Sen. Paul Sarlo (D-Bergen) to refer to the budget's final hours, acknowledging the chaos and suggesting the Legislature should consider a "modernization" of the process to instill greater order and procedural transparency to it moving forward.

His suggestion notwithstanding, "modernization" of the system is not the issue in need of addressing. It is the abuse of the system that is.

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