



Budget? Not yet. House appropriations subcommittees that were supposed to meet last Thursday and help put the finishing touches on the House version of the state budget did not get that chance. Rep. H.M. “Mickey” Michaux, Jr. (D-Durham), who serves as the House Appropriations Committee’s Senior Chair, said the lawmakers cancelled their meetings because they needed more complete information on the income side before they could proceed with spending.

House Speaker Joe Hackney (D-Orange) has set this coming Friday as the deadline for completing the House version of the budget, but many now speculate that they won’t be able to finish that soon. If the budget was a cake, and you stuck a toothpick in it, the toothpick would come out gummy. Still, the pressure is on to finish the job. The same party controls both chambers of the General Assembly, and their leaders want to look efficient and effective by getting the budget finished and handing it over to Gov. Easley by June 30. Whether they’ll be able to pull that off is still an open question.

Maybe this is good news. The last version of the budget I saw included \$8.4 million in additional money for child daycare and an allocation to extend educational benefits for foster kids up to age 21, but other things we care about – such as \$4.619 million for the Child Welfare Education program were still teetering on the bucket’s trembling rim.

The Senate HHS Appropriations Sub-committee illustrated magnitude of the problem last week when it held two days of hearing on 104 spending bills introduced by various legislators. Copies of the bills sat in forlorn stacks on a long counter at the back of the hearing room. Sponsors got two minutes apiece to tout their measures. Though a handful of those bills will find their way into the state budget, most don’t have a prayer of enactment, and the hearings were mostly a sop to the bills’ sponsors.

Crossover deadline looms. May 17th is the date by which policy and purely statutory bills must pass in one chamber or the other. (Money bills and study bills are exempt.) In the case of certain bills that we oppose, the onrushing day is welcome. For example, bills such as SB 821 Juvenile Non-secure Custody Criteria, SB 842 Revise Law/Juvenile Notice of Appeal, SB 1077 Regulation of Juvenile Discovery Orders and SB 1538 County Commissioners Authority/Boards & Agencies must pass the Senate by May 17 or they will be kaput for the session, no matter how long the session runs.

Social Services Study Committee? Maybe. Will the solons form a House Study Committee on Social Services? Rep. Rick Glazier (D-Cumberland) has agreed to add that request to the study committee and technical corrections bill that the House will consider at the end of the session. Rep. Glazier will do this at the urging of the Social Services Consortium. There’s no guarantee that the House will approve the request, and if it does, there’s no guarantee that Speaker Joe Hackney will actually appoint the study committee members, but it’s worth a try. The idea is to use the temporary study

committee to draw attention to the growing burden of unfunded mandates that rain down on local departments of social services and to seek help. Some advocates and state lawmakers continue to assume that local DSSs can absorb the administrative costs of all manner of services. If a study committee can't cure this problem, it can – at least – draw attention to the plight of local human service agencies that must do more and more with less.

Our current struggles and disappointments with the state budget remind me of the time a conscientious father sat down with his pre-teen son and asked, “Son, do you know the real truth about the birds and the bees?” To the father’s astonishment, the boy said, “Don’t tell me! I don’t want to hear it!” and he burst into tears. The father said, “What on earth is wrong? Why are you so upset?” The lad finally recovered himself enough to reply, and he said, “First, you told me there’s no Santa Claus. Then you told me there’s no Easter Bunny. Then you told me there’s no Tooth Fairy. . . . *Now* you’re going to tell me there’s no such thing as sex!”

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom Bennett". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Executive Director, NCACDSS