

FL Health Law Battle Likely Back in 2016

BY ASSOCIATED PRESS

A bruising budget battle that divided Republicans in the Florida Legislature is over for now, but the truce is likely only to last a few months.

Legislators passed a nearly \$79 billion budget Friday with just days to spare. Legislators had until July 1 to pass a budget or state government would have been partially shut down. They didn't pass a budget during their regular session because they were divided over health care spending. That sparked a stalemate — and finger-pointing will remain when legislators return for their 2016 session.



Senate President Andy Gardiner, R-Orlando

Credit MyFloridaHouse.gov

"It's kind of the new norm," said Senate President Andy Gardiner, who works as an executive at an Orlando-area hospital. "Until we come up with a long term health care solution for the uninsured that's just going to be where we are."

The main problem is that state legislators this year dipped into a budget surplus and steered it to the state's hospitals to replace dwindling federal aid that had been paid to the hospitals to treat the poor and uninsured.

They only did that after the Senate and House tangled over whether to expand health care coverage to as many as 500,000 Floridians in order to draw down billions associated with President Barack Obama's health care overhaul.

Federal officials capped the money at \$1 billion this year and warned the amount will be pared back to \$600 million in 2016. The federal government has urged Florida to expand coverage, but that has been staunchly opposed by both Gov. Rick Scott and Republican leaders in the House. Scott has sued the federal government, arguing that it was trying to coerce Florida into expanding Medicaid; it's not clear when the lawsuit will be resolved.

House leaders argue that instead of expanding coverage the state should overhaul health care in other ways, including removing red tape so that new hospitals can be built quicker and letting nurses prescribe medicines. During the June special session the House passed several health care bills but they were never considered by the Senate.

"Frankly I think there's plenty of solutions to be had and we don't necessarily have to go back after things that have proven not to be successful," said Rep. Matt Hudson, a Naples Republican.

But if the Senate pushes its health care coverage plan again it could lead to the two sides once again getting deadlocked.

Top House Republicans warn the expansion could put taxpayers on the hook for billions of dollars and that the Obama administration may back out of its promise to pay the entire bill for the first few years and 90 percent after that. They also feared that a larger than anticipated number of recipients would sign up, further increasing the financial burden on the state.

"I imagine it's going to be the same fight and if we do get into that fight next year, it's going to be the same result again," said Rep. Evan Jenne, a Dania Beach Democrat.

Legislators are returning to the state Capitol early next year because they moved up their session starting date to January. A big question is whether or not tensions will remain between House and Senate Republicans when they begin work on next year's budget.

The Senate budget chief predicted that a long break could ease tempers.

"Time is an ally here, and I think over time we'll reset the clock," said Sen. Tom Lee, a Brandon Republican. "I wouldn't predict that any of this is going to spill over into the future."