

Opinion: As Murphy-Sweeney Budget Maneuvering Approaches, We've Seen It All Before

The reduction, the governor has contended, was a meaningless gesture, saving consumers pennies while depriving the state of crucial revenue.

The governor's tax-increase promise tees up another eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation with Sweeney and Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin (D-Middlesex) and raises the prospect of budget deliberations reaching the 11th hour with the potential for a government shutdown if neither side relents.

Sweeney has emerged the victor in the last two budget cycles, forcing Murphy to back off his demands out of concern for bringing public wrath down on his administration for shuttering state offices and public parks a few days before the July Fourth holiday and furloughing thousands of state employees.

Presumably, Murphy has learned that blame for a government shutdown falls almost entirely on the governor's office rather than on the Legislature, an acknowledgment that when push comes to shove, Sweeney holds the more powerful leverage.

To support his position, Murphy is fond of quoting numerous opinion polls showing overwhelming public favor for taxing the wealthy. High income earners, he insists, should pay their fair share at a time when the state faces critical needs in school aid, transportation and public employee benefits.

It is, he says, a matter of "tax fairness and investing in the middle class," while providing property tax relief.

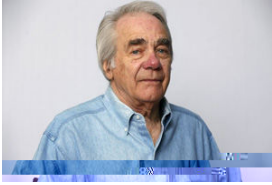
No more persuasive today than in past

His arguments swayed neither Sweeney nor Coughlin in the past and they are no more persuasive today than they were then.

Further attempts to win hearts and minds through rhetoric are futile, little more than two antagonists locked into position and talking past each other.

Only serious across the table from one another negotiations can break the stalemate and, if history is any indicator, chances of that are dim.

Neither Sweeney nor Murphy seem inclined to make the first move, to offer concessions in return for concessions. Common ground appears unattainable and Murphy seems destined to continue his Captain Ahab-like pursuit "until we get it."



Carl Golden

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