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### Mich. gov.'s budget process provides few specifics

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LANSING, Mich.

Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder's move to make the state budget "simple, fair and efficient" may instead be leaving the public in the dark about how its money will be spent.

The new Republican governor wants to roll the entire state budget into just two bills -- one for education and another for everything else, rather than considering most departments separately. His proposals offer few specifics, instead providing short lists of programs and a suggested level of spending for each.

Snyder said he's happy to share details on how he wants to spend the money in the state's \$45.9 billion budget but doesn't see a need to lock every dime into a specific category. He wants the Legislature to "hold us accountable for delivering results to people, hold us accountable for showing transparency in where those dollars go and then let us be good managers."

The approach doesn't impair the ability to have a review of the dollars, he said, but allows departments "to be responsive and be creative and actually empower the employees."

But the governor's line items for programs and spending wouldn't be binding. That basically could allow unelected department heads rather than legislators to decide how the money should be spent, said Craig Thiel, state affairs director for the nonpartisan Citizens Research Council in Lansing.

"It's already ... difficult to follow the budget. I don't think that this makes it any easier," said Thiel, who often analyzes state spending. "Block grants is a good way to describe it. It's not even program budgeting."

The lack of specifics concerns citizen watchdog groups such as Common Cause Michigan. People really had a sense of what was being funded when they could see department budgets laid out program by program, said executive director Christina Kuo. Doing it Snyder's way "really goes against his commitment to open government and transparency."

Republican leaders in the House and Senate haven't publicly rejected the governor's budgeting system but have expressed reservations. House Speaker Jase Bolger of Marshall wants House appropriations subcommittees to continue to deal with specific budgetary line items such as corrections, environmental quality, higher education and community health.

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Those budgets then could be "rolled up" into the two omnibus budget bills Snyder wants, Bolger spokesman Ari Adler said. But the bills would contain the extensive line items that legislators -- not Snyder -- approve.

"Do we need to have as many line items as we've had in the past? Maybe not," Adler said. "But there certainly needs to be enough that the Legislature feels it's done due diligence on these budgets. Without line items, the responsibility really is being handed over to the administration."

Senate Majority Leader Randy Richardville said senators have told him they want to oversee bills for each department as they have in the past.

The governor said he isn't trying to make the state's spending plans murkier or take away lawmakers' budget oversight. But he wants to be held accountable on whether his administration is able to improve Michigan residents' health, education, safety and quality of life as measured by the Michigan Dashboard he has set up rather than whether he has spent money on programs lawmakers favor.

"You're still held accountable," Snyder told The Associated Press.

Richardville's reply: "My job is to look beyond the dashboard and under the hood."

John Cherry, who served in the Legislature for 20 years before becoming Gov. Jennifer Granholm's lieutenant governor, has seen the budget process from both the legislative and the executive branches. He, too, sees problems with Snyder's approach.

"You can probably argue that it is very efficient, but democracy isn't always the most efficient form of government," said Cherry, the Senate Democratic leader for eight years. "If it's all rolled up into one, that's not very transparent."

Cherry can understand Snyder's approach, even if he doesn't agree with it.

"It's always in the governor's best interest to consolidate . . . It really tends to cut the Legislature out of the picture," Cherry said. "People can't really see what is happening with a potential cut."

By keeping most of the discretion over how the money is spent, Snyder could move money within budget bills without having to ask lawmakers to approve any transfers. He also could eliminate funding for programs he doesn't like and move money to areas he prefers.

"There's this tradeoff, we think, between the flexibility in administering programs and ... the transparency on where the dollars are being spent," Thiel said.

Snyder has asked lawmakers to approve the budget by May 31, four to six weeks earlier than it's traditionally done and months before the budget year starts Oct. 1. Budget hearings already have begun.

Jack Kresnak, president and CEO of Michigan's Children, is closely watching the proceedings while trying to keep the new governor from cutting too much money from education and children's services.

"There is something to be said for getting these budgets done in a timely manner and not dragging it out until the end of October like we've done in the past," Kresnak said. "On the other hand . . . there has to be transparency and scrutiny and a chance for the public to weigh in."

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--Gov. Snyder's proposed education budget bill: <http://www.michigan.gov/documents/budget/5--345978--7.pdf>

--Gov. Snyder's proposed general operations budget bill: <http://www.michigan.gov/documents/budget/4--345976--7.pdf>

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