And Another Budget Is Done
By Fredrick Cabell Jr.

In my career as a lobbyist and a legislative staffer, I have experienced the process of the development and passage of many state budgets. I am writing this after just going through another one. It is hard for me to remember specifics of all of them (it has been more than 20 years), but I certainly remember the mood, the emotions and the general sense of the outcomes.

I should explain at the outset that by referring to a budget by a governor’s name I don’t mean to infer that the governor at the time was solely responsible for the budget that became law. The governor and the General Assembly create the budget. In the end, they both deserve the credit or blame, or typically a bit of both, depending on your political persuasion. It would be awkward to refer to a budget as the 128th General Assembly’s budget. Especially because I made that number up. I have never seen the General Assembly referred to in that manner, only by years — for instance, this is the 2021-22 session. Thus, I will stick with governors.

At the beginning of my career, I was spoiled by the budgets of the Ridge years. When Gov. Tom Ridge first took office, fiscal restraint was the word of the day, though it did not end that way. The budgets of those years remind me of the saying about the month of March: in like a fiscal conservative lion, out like a profligate liberal lamb. The dot-com bubble had not yet popped and the commonwealth and much of the nation was filled with cash. Keep in mind, it was toward the end of the Ridge years that the wildly extravagant bump in state workers’ pensions was enacted, and we are still feeling the ramifications of that decision to this day.

The Rendell years were, at least from my perspective, pure chaos. The Bible says that before God created the world, everything was chaos. Well, sort of like God, Ed Rendell created stuff out of the chaos. Regardless of your political bent, if you studied his tenure, you could not help but be impressed by his ability to get what he wanted. Gov. Rendell could wheel and deal with the best of them. He wanted a lot, and he got a lot. He knew how to use pressure. I am pretty sure that there was not one on-time budget during his entire eight-year tenure. At least it felt that way.

Strangely, even though it is more recent in time, I don’t remember much about the Corbett budgets. Probably because they were neither as exciting nor traumatizing as the previous years. I do remember that all of Gov. Tom Corbett’s budgets were on time. They were pretty plain vanilla budgets. It helps to have both chambers the same party as the governor.

Gov. Tom Wolf sort of picked up where Gov. Rendell left off, but without the benefit of having at least one chamber of the same party. Thus, we have seen delayed budgets. One budget was not completed until March of the following year. I remember being in the capitol on Dec. 23 of that budget year, complaining with choice words because the House had just announced it would be in session the following week. At least when Gov. Rendell had us in on Dec. 23, it was to finalize the budget on that day.

In addition to delayed budgets, there have been a few budgets that Gov. Wolf indicated his displeasure with by refusing to sign the general appropriations bill and allowing it to become law without his signature. I think that is an interesting constitutional face-saving mechanism that helps keep things rolling along.

From a PBA perspective, this has been a pretty good
budget year when considering the current environment. A General Assembly dominated by a majority party red-hot mad at the judiciary did not cut funding to the courts. Bullet dodged.

The General Assembly also did not divert funding from the court’s technology fund, thus saving the Common Pleas Case Management System. So, on court funding, I would rate it a draw.

In the bad news category, despite efforts by the Pennsylvania Bar Association and others, no funding for criminal indigent defense was enacted. We will keep plugging away. As for good news, civil legal aid did very well in the budget. The PBA did not have any involvement in it, but I think it is reasonable to assume that many of our members will be happy to hear that the Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network was able to secure an increase of $1.5 million in state dollars for legal aid appropriation. The increase brings that funding from $2.661 million to $4.161 million annually. This is in addition to the federal money that the legal aid organizations received, this year to the tune of $5,049,000.

The General Assembly is now getting down to business on a wide variety of topics, and the next budget process will not begin until February 2022. Given that they managed to salt away a huge chunk of money ($2.5 billion) in the commonwealth’s Stabilization Fund, commonly called the rainy day fund, it is hoped that next year’s budget will be smooth sailing. Yeah, I have heard that before! 😁

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