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Budget finalized in last hours of legislative session, Democrats say Indiana deserves more

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By Erica Irish
TheStatehouseFile.com

INDIANAPOLIS—Edging into the late evening Wednesday and ending in party-line votes, lawmakers approved Indiana’s next two-year budget, totaling \$34.6 billion for dozens of state-funded programs.

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House Speaker Brian Bosma, R-Indianapolis, said Wednesday afternoon lawmakers were ready to put the issue to rest and anticipated few changes after a conference committee published a report Tuesday. Debate about what programs should have been addressed in the biennium budget outlined in [House Bill 1001](#) dominated the final hours of the session.

Republican leaders touted the bill in its final hours for its expansive appropriations for K-12 education, which added up to a \$763 million investment overall, and its ability to maintain over \$2 billion in reserves, or 11.8 percent of the total state budget.

The budget also provides \$500 million across the biennium to the Indiana Department of Child Services, \$5.1 billion to the state's Medicaid program and, among other adjustments, increases to the per day allotment for county jail managers from \$35 to \$37.5 in fiscal year 2020 and \$40 in fiscal year 2021.

But frustration was clear among some Democrats, as reflected in the party-line votes in each chamber, with the budget passing 41-8 in the Senate and 67-31 in the House.

Well before voting machines opened, however, individual Democrats, including Rep. Gregory Porter, D-Indianapolis, said they would continue to oppose the measure. Porter originally sat on a conference committee for HB 1001, but Bosma removed him Wednesday, appointing House Ways and Means Co-Chair Tim Brown, R-Crawfordsville, as his replacement.

"I wasn't going to sign it," Porter said. "It doesn't meet the needs of all Hoosiers."

Democrats in both chambers proposed an array of revisions to the budget since it was first introduced in January, including everything from tax exemptions for female hygiene products and college textbooks to proposals to set a minimum teacher salary across all of Indiana's school districts.

But virtually none were incorporated in the final version. According to a press release issued by Senate Democrats Wednesday, all amendments proposed to HB 1001 by Senate Democrats were removed in the final version.

First-year Senate Appropriations Committee Chair Ryan Mishler, R-Bremen, attempted to offer a reminder to his Democratic counterparts as they listed off programs lost in the final version.

"We all made sacrifices to push money to K-12," he said.

Republican leadership came to his defense, with Sen. Randall Head, R-Logansport, speaking about his own difficult experiences alongside Mishler and the Senate Appropriations Committee.

"It seemed to me all along that we were faced with a series of bad choices, especially when revenue came in lower than expected," Head said, referring to a [forecast by the State Budget Agency published last week](#) that revealed a \$100 million shortfall in the original budget plan caused by less-than-expected revenue collection and \$60 million in new Medicaid costs. "There's no way a budget can make everybody happy, but you did the best you could for the most people possible."

Still, colleagues like Sen. Jean Breaux, D-Indianapolis, condemned the budget plan and what they say is a lack of consideration for programs that could help Indiana's underserved.

"I was asking for 0.00006 percent of the budget to radically reduce Indiana's outrageously high infant mortality rates, something the governor outlined as part of his 2019 agenda," Breaux said in a written statement about her proposal to use Medicaid to help pay for doula services for low-income pregnant mothers. Doulas help prepare pregnant women for labor and motherhood through education and coaching.

"However," Breaux's statement continued, "the supermajority seems to think that saving the lives of Hoosier women and children is insignificant."

Sen. Karen Tallian, D-Portage, pointed to Breaux's doula program as one of several examples removed from the final biennium budget in her last formal speech on the topic.

"Those little bits of money are really important to some small programs that have been nonchalantly dismissed," Tallian said. "Do I just get to blame the House, or the administration?"



Sen. Ryan Mishler, R-Bremen, presents the final version of the state budget to the Senate. Photo by Bryan Wells, TheStatehouseFile.com



Rep. Gregory Porter, D-Indianapolis, expresses his opposition to the final version of the state budget. Photo by Bryan Wells, TheStatehouseFile.com

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\$654	\$400
\$378	\$539

I don't know. I don't know who made all these cuts."

Her final plea to her majority-party colleagues was even more blunt: "What the heck? We pay taxes. We expect things."

Erica Irish is a reporter for TheStatehouseFile.com, a news website powered by Franklin College journalism students.

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