

A week before opening day, lawmakers already at work

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SANTA FE – The legislative session is a week away, but New Mexico lawmakers are already scrutinizing budget documents and preparing to work over the weekend.

The House Appropriations and Finance Committee – where the state budget starts its journey – has scheduled hearings for more than 50 state agencies this week, and some members will meet Saturday to go over special budget requests.

The Senate Rules Committee, in a rare move, also held confirmation hearings last week to help prepare for the appointment of new state officials and board members.

It's all part of an accelerated schedule for the 2020 session, for which lawmakers will convene for 30 days, starting Tuesday. The Legislature meets twice as long – for 60 days – during odd-numbered years.

Adopting a budget is at the top of this year's agenda.

The pre-session work “is incredibly necessary,” said Rep. Patricia Lundstrom, a Gallup Democrat and chairwoman of the House appropriations committee. “We would not make our deadline if we didn't start early.”

By rule, the House aims to send a budget proposal to the Senate by the halfway point of the session, or a little over two weeks after opening day.

Rep. Randal Crowder, R-Clovis, said he and other members of the appropriations committee are going agency by agency this week to compare dueling recommendations submitted by the governor and the Legislative Finance Committee, a bipartisan group of lawmakers that meets between sessions.

“It's imperative to do that,” said Crowder of the early start.

The two budget recommendations overlap for the most part, but with substantial discrepancies on college financial aid and spending on early childhood programs.

Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham is proposing \$35 million for a new scholarship program aimed at making college essentially tuition-free for New Mexico residents, in addition to increased spending on a child care assistance program.

Altogether, the governor is recommending about \$7.7 billion in sustained spending next year, an increase of about 8.4%. The Legislative Finance Committee is recommending \$7.5 billion.

An oil boom in southeastern New Mexico has propelled state revenue to record highs, allowing the state to increase spending.

The work to reconcile the budget differences has already begun. The House appropriations committee met all day Monday in a committee room filled with state officials and lobbyists.

The meetings will continue through Saturday.

On the other side of the Roundhouse, the Senate Finance Committee starts its meetings Wednesday.

The Senate Rules Committee, meanwhile, held confirmation hearings for more than a dozen new appointees last week to state boards and commissions. Final Senate approval is still needed, but the hearings give the Senate a head start.

“It’s important we get our work done whenever we can get it done,” said Sen. Jeff Steinborn, a Las Cruces Democrat and vice chairman of the Rules Committee.

At least four Cabinet secretaries and State Police Chief Tim Johnson will be up for confirmation this session, too. They are Ryan Stewart of Public Education, Elizabeth Groginsky of Early Childhood Education and Care, Katrina Hotrum-Lopez of Aging and Long-Term Services, and Alisha Tafoya Lucero of Corrections.

They can continue running their state departments with confirmation pending, although they must step down if they’re rejected by the Senate.

In even-numbered years – when some or all legislators are on the ballot – New Mexico’s shorter sessions are generally limited to budget and revenue proposals, although the governor is empowered to add other items to the agenda.

Lujan Grisham, a Democrat in her second year as governor, is expected to add a variety of topics to this year’s session, including legalization of recreational marijuana; a red flag law, allowing the temporary seizure of guns from people deemed an immediate threat; and overhauling the pension system for state employees.