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Washington Legislature unveils \$69.2B two-year state budget

Completed with less than 36 hours left in the 2023 session, the budget boosts funding for state worker wages, special education and climate issues.

by Joseph O'Sullivan / April 22, 2023



Democratic lawmakers in the Washington Legislature on Saturday afternoon unveiled a new two-year state budget that boosts funding for worker pay, climate projects and special education.

The release of [the \\$69.2 billion state operating budget](#) came less than 36 hours before the end of this year's 105-day legislative session, giving the public – and lawmakers themselves – little time to actually read the spending blueprint before it was voted into law on Sunday.

The operating budget deal [struck between House and Senate lawmakers in the Democratic majority](#) will distribute spending on a range of programs across Washington, from K-12 schools, prisons and the mental-health system to social services, parks, and wildfire response and environmental programs.

It adds approximately \$4.7 billion in new spending, according to a statement by House Democrats; leaves a total of \$3 billion in reserve accounts; and doesn't include any broad tax increases.

At the budget's unveiling Saturday afternoon, Sen. Christine Rolfes, D-Bainbridge Island, said the final deal includes the largest funding increase for K-12 schools since the Legislature's investments to resolve the landmark state Supreme Court order of 2012 to fund basic education, aka the *McCleary* decision.

“Probably the biggest investment in public education since the *McCleary* era,” said Rolfes, the Senate's chief Democratic budget writer. The budget includes increased spending for special education, funding school counselors and nurses to help children throughout the state, she added.

Sen. Lynda Wilson, R-Vancouver, said she wanted to see tax relief in the budget, but she agreed with the boost in special education and some of the spending on climate change.

“One of the priorities for our caucus was special education, and there is historic funding for that in this budget,” said Wilson, the ranking Republican on the Senate Ways & Means Committee.

Leaders in the Democratic-controlled House and Senate have focused on boosting pay to attract state workers in a tight labor market still experiencing rising prices and disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic. Shortages of nurses, law enforcement, social-services workers and other laborers are impacting a variety of state and local government agencies.

The new budget approves and pays for \$2.2 billion in pay increases for state workers and school employees, according to Democratic budget writers. On top of that, the spending plan increases government reimbursement rates so privately run care operations – like skilled nursing homes and assisted living facilities – can better recruit and retain workers.

Also included is an additional \$4.6 million annually to fund and expand the [Amend program being used in a handful of Washington's 12 prisons](#). Amend seeks to reshape the culture of prisons through more humane treatment in an attempt to improve the lives of both incarcerated individuals and corrections officers.

In addition to the state operating budget, lawmakers were also expected to approve by the end of Sunday a pair of other new two-year budgets to fund transportation and capital construction.

Among other things, the new capital budget includes \$400 million for affordable-housing projects across Washington, according to a statement by Rep. Mike Steele, R-Chelan. Steele, the ranking Republican on the House Capital Budget committee, called the agreement proof that “bipartisanship does exist in Olympia.”

“This plan reflects key priorities that don't simply serve minority interests, but all of Washington state,” Steele said in prepared remarks. “This budget supports development, encourages economic vitality, and puts people to work, even in the smallest of communities.”

While the housing increase in the capital budget is sizable, Saturday's budget deal officially marks the end of more ambitious [proposals to construct affordable housing](#). Gov. Jay Inslee's proposed housing-bond referendum stalled in recent weeks, and the new deal does not include a proposed increase in the real estate excise tax, also known as the home-sellers tax, that would have boosted funding for affordable-housing projects.