4 sessions, 3 breakdowns for Florida Legislature come at a cost to taxpayers

HIGHLIGHTS

The part-time legislators will end up spending 26 weeks working at the Capitol this year
Cost of repeated special sessions is likely to exceed $1 million
Add to the tab $9 million in legal costs for the fight over congressional and Senate maps

TALLAHASSEE — The Florida Legislature’s failures are costing taxpayers a lot of money.

In the course of just seven months, the budget fell apart and the House and Senate fell short of agreement on redrawing congressional and Senate districts. In total, the cost to taxpayers of repeated special sessions this year is likely to exceed $1 million.

“This is a very important time for Florida, and people need to take these three failures very seriously,” Democratic Leader Mark Pafford of West Palm Beach said. “The people’s government has been stolen.”

The Legislature, intended to be part time and meet in session just once a year, has instead convened four times, including the regular session in the spring that broke down after disagreements over Medicaid expansion. That adds up to 17 weeks. Include weeks for committee hearings and by the year’s end, lawmakers will have been in Tallahassee for 26 weeks.

In total, the special sessions could have covered the cost of 16 new beds for court-ordered stays in state mental hospitals. Or funded nearly all of a $1.6 million raise for forest firefighters, vetoed out of this year’s budget by Gov. Rick Scott.

The session costs do not include more than $9 million in legal costs incurred by the Legislature in the fight over the congressional and Senate maps.

Speaker Steve Crisafulli, R-Merritt Island, said Thursday that he doesn’t think the House has caused any of the collapses in the Republican-controlled Legislature this year.
“I don’t think we in the House have had anything come off the rails,” he said. “We’ve passed these things and put them forward.”

Here’s a breakdown of the Legislature’s extra time and how it was spent:

**Budget special session**
- **Length:** Three weeks (June 1 to June 20).
- **Cost to taxpayers:** $651,435.
- **Outcome:** Prompted when the House headed home early from the regular session after a disagreement over Medicaid expansion, lawmakers passed a budget to fund the state just a week and a half shy of the new fiscal year in July. In the process, however, Scott called on agencies to develop contingency plans in the event that the state government was shut down.

**Congressional redistricting special session**
- **Length:** Two weeks (Aug. 10 to Aug. 21).
- **Cost to taxpayers:** $221,741.
- **Outcome:** Talks between the House and Senate broke down in the final hours, and Senate Reapportionment Chairman Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton, led a walkout of a meeting with House leaders. The session ended without a map from the Legislature. On Tuesday, the Supreme Court will begin hearings to decide whether to use a congressional district map drawn by the plaintiffs in a lawsuit against the Legislature.

**State Senate redistricting special session**
- **Length:** Three weeks (Oct. 26 to Nov. 6).
- **Cost to taxpayers:** Not yet calculated. However, given the cost of bringing lawmakers and their staffs to Tallahassee for previous sessions, it could easily surpass $250,000.
- **Outcome:** Thursday night, the Senate rejected a new map for its districts that had been agreed to by Galvano and House Redistricting Chairman Jose Oliva, R-Miami Lakes. The 23-16 rejection vote means the boundaries of Senate districts for the 2016 election remain unresolved and Tallahassee Circuit Court Judge George Reynolds will decide the next step.

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