

~~Brinkley~~ bucks state budget; governor drops by after lawmaker's 'no' vote, criticism

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ANNAPOLIS — The day after casting his first "no" vote on the state budget, Sen. David Brinkley was surprised to arrive at his office and find out the governor had stopped by, unannounced, before 8 a.m.

Brinkley, a Frederick County Republican, has served on the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee for nine years. In every other year, he voted for the budget — even when proposed and considered by a Democratic governor and legislature — because he believes the state needs to pass a budget and operate, he said.

But this year was different. Brinkley voted against the \$14.7 billion general fund budget Tuesday night, giving a speech on the floor of the Senate in which he explained he didn't think the budget did enough to address future year deficits, and criticized Gov. Martin O'Malley, saying he failed to show enough leadership on the matter.

On Wednesday morning, O'Malley came to his office to discuss Brinkley's vote. Because he missed him, Brinkley went to try to see him in the governor's office later the afternoon, eventually finding him in a hallway of the Maryland State House.

"I understand you didn't vote for my budget," O'Malley said. "... I thought I put together a good budget."

The two leaders conversed in hushed tones for a few moments before O'Malley left.

After the conversation, Brinkley said he stood by his comments that O'Malley should have exhibited more leadership regarding the budget. He said the governor released his budget and then left the House and Senate to make the hard decisions.

"The budget still harvests money from other funds; the budget still pushes the problem down the road," Brinkley said. "And the criticism I made to the governor was it pushes the problem down to whoever his successor would be." Brinkley and Delegate Galen Clagett are the two Frederick County state lawmakers who serve on the state's budget committees — and spend much of the session in budget hearings and in negotiations about how it will turn out. Now that the budget has passed both houses, Brinkley and Clagett will serve on the conference committees that hammer out differences between the House and Senate versions.

They also have very different takes on the budget. Clagett, a Democrat, voted for it and called votes against it
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"unconscionable."

"I'm the only delegate in Frederick County who voted for that budget and I'm proud to have done that, and I think these people ought to hang their heads," Clagett said.

"Because what they're saying is they don't care about education, they don't care about health care services, they don't care about the community college, they don't care about the municipalities that need the highway user funds."

He said funding to local boards of education and governments makes up about 40 percent of the budget, and he said Frederick County's share increases in the budget by \$10 million over last fiscal year, to about \$273 million. There are some new costs being passed on to the counties, such as paying for the cost of real estate assessments, that are not factored into that figure.

The budget does not rely on tax increases, but does increase a number of fees, notably titling fees, the cost of vanity license plates, the charge for land records, parole and probation fees, and fees associated with issuing birth certificates and file searches for them. The Senate has also approved a special sales tax increase for alcoholic beverages, increasing it to 3 percent in three years. That legislation would need to pass the House of Delegates as well in order to become law. Clagett opposes that tax increase.

Clagett defended the fee increases, saying they were necessary to pay for costs associated with the services. For instance, the land records fee is increasing from \$20 to \$40. The fee is expected to generate \$17 million, Clagett said, adding that the money will be used to pay for associated computer projects and the salaries and benefits of the records clerks. The titling fees will bring in about \$50 million, which Clagett said will help to fund transportation projects and local highway user funding for road maintenance.

"These are like enterprise funds and the fees have to be raised to cover our costs," Clagett said.

The only exception, Clagett said, is the birth records fee increase, which is expected to generate about \$4 million and will benefit the state's general fund.

Clagett and Brinkley have different views of how the state should approach its structural deficit -- the amount that state spending is expected to grow over revenue. Clagett said this bill reduces the deficit by about 40 percent, making it feasible to eliminate the deficit by fiscal 2015.

"Our philosophy is to maintain programs and do the least amount of damage as we put the budget together," Clagett said.

But Brinkley argues that the legislature and governor should have made decisions that further reduced the deficit.

"The fact is the election's behind us, the fact is there's some tough choices that

need to be made, and they do involve a lot of cuts that need to be permanent and we do need to make sure that Maryland's a friendly environment for businesses," Brinkley said. "And we lost an opportunity with that."

The conference committee has not yet scheduled its first meeting, but differences between the two bills are expected to be worked out and the budget finalized before the legislature's scheduled adjournment on April 11.