

The Patriot-News

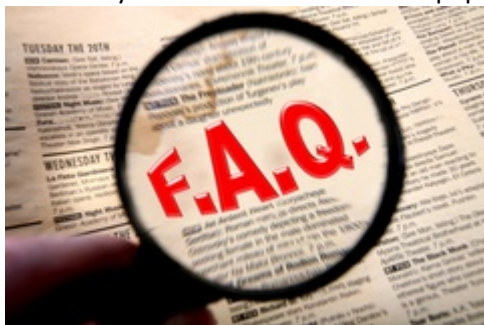
Our view on budget: devil is in the details

By [Patriot-News Editorial Board](#)

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A handshake used to mean something powerful. It was the symbol of a “gentleman’s agreement” in the days when keeping one’s word was sacrosanct.

Not so anymore. Deals are made on paper. The legal language matters.



Pennsylvanians and rank and file lawmakers await budget details.

That’s why rank-and-file legislators, not to mention the public, are upset about the current “handshake budget.”

More than a week ago, Gov. Ed Rendell and leaders of three caucuses announced “a deal.” At the Sept. 18 news conference, optimism abounded that the measure would be on the legislative floor in days.

Details, however, remain scarce.

“We are operating in a vacuum,” said Glen Grell, R-Hampden Twp., in frustration this weekend.

Yes, we know the budget deal is \$27.9 billion, a figure that seemed the obvious compromise for months.

Yes, we know there is no broad-based tax increase, and we should get ready to play table games.

But the devil is in the details, as lawyers remind us. How much will the government pocket from table games? Which arts groups fall under the entertainment tax? Will VFWs and Elks Clubs be better off or not under the small games of chance tax? At this stage, verbal assurances no longer cut it.

On the spending side, leaders have been mum. Rendell’s demand to increase basic education funding appears to be part of the deal. But what about libraries? Services? State parks? Arts?

This newspaper has received hundreds of letters advocating for various causes. We are certain that

individual member offices and the governor have received thousands, not to mention the many rallies at the state Capitol during the last few months.

Where did the scalpel fall and where did it add back? It is impossible to know without details on paper. For some groups such as libraries, rumors of cuts vary as widely as 20 percent to 70 percent.

We stand with most Pennsylvanians in hoping we are close. We don't want this deal to fall through, especially for the sake of so many nonprofits, counties and school districts that are on the brink.

But leaders can't let the final budget proposal emerge and expect people to embrace it in a matter of hours.

The U.S. House of Representatives did that with the "cap and trade" legislation in June. Congressmen had fewer than 24 hours to review the final bill before a vote. It was not publicly available in its final form at all.

We don't want that kind of politics in Pennsylvania. If legislative leaders truly have a deal worth enacting, then it should be able to stand the test of rank-and-file member and public scrutiny for a few days before the vote.

Ninety-one days past budget deadline, Pennsylvanians deserve more than a handshake and smile. Leaders must put themselves on the line, literally, with line-by-line details.