

House and Senate move farther apart

TAX

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tax relief, was eager to pile on more cuts, including a committee's vote to eliminate half of the state's school property taxes in exchange for a penny increase in the state's 6 percent sales tax.

The Senate took a more cautious approach, especially trying to soften revenue losses to public schools.

Democrats, whose votes are needed to put the tax-break package on a special ballot for the Jan. 29 election, also expressed concerns about the complexity of the package. The Legislature's first attempt at writing a constitutional amendment to cut property taxes was struck from the ballot last month by a Leon County judge who deemed it confusing and misleading.

"We've spent two days now discussing 12 different, complicated provisions. Some are readily understandable, but

some are incredibly difficult to grasp," said Sen. Ted Deutch, D-Boca Raton.

If no agreement is in sight by Thursday, many legislators will again be forced out of hotel rooms booked by football fans attending this weekend's Florida State University-University of Miami game. They ran into the same problem two weeks ago.

By late Tuesday there were already rumblings that legislators may have to work into next week if they can't quickly resolve their differences today. Still, key negotiators hold out hope of reaching agreement this week.

"This is a dynamic process. Things change fairly quickly," said Rep. Dean Cannon, R-Winter Park, the lead property tax negotiator in the House.

"We'll regroup and see what'll pass," said Sen. Dan Webster, R-Winter Garden, the Senate's lead negotiator. "I expected to get out of here Wednesday, but I did bring four suits."

On Tuesday, a House committee gave all property owners, not just permanent residents living in their homes, at least a temporary victory with a vote to cap their yearly property assessment increases at 3 percent, the same tax break enjoyed by home-steaded properties since 1995.

The expanded tax break passed out of the House Policy and Budget Committee with support from Democrats as well as Republicans, even though committee members were given no information on how it would affect local governments and public schools.

"We made probably a \$5 billion or \$10 billion decision without a single document in front of us," said Rep. Jack Seiler, D-Wilton Manors.

The extra penny sales tax, also approved by the House

committee, would replace \$3.9 billion in property taxes, which would amount to a 20 percent property tax cut in Broward and Palm Beach counties, House Republican leaders said.

Meanwhile, a Senate committee was moving in the opposite direction: It gutted a provision sought by House leaders to eliminate all property taxes for poor seniors.

The Senate Finance and Tax Committee instead voted to exempt from taxation the first \$100,000 in assessed value of a low-income senior's home. That would slice about \$1 billion from school revenues over the next four years.

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