

Start the Budget Discussion Earlier

The state budget is not the only business the Legislature attends to each session, but it's clearly at the top of the to-do list. Appropriating money has become a much bigger job in the last 25 years. More and more responsibility has devolved from the federal government to the states. Vermont state government now oversees expenditures totaling more than \$4 billion.

It's important, therefore, that legislators and the public have as much time as possible to scrutinize the blueprint for spending that the governor presents each year. It's a dense document, which establishes Vermont's priorities and determines the course the state will follow.

By law, the Legislature sets a deadline of mid- to late January for the governor to deliver his annual budget to the lawmakers. Depending on the calendar, that date can fall in the third week of the session. That's too late for legislators, and it's too late for citizens who want to weigh in on how Vermont should use its tax dollars.

Come May, it's a safe bet that editorial writers, the governor's spokesperson, and others will start complaining that that the Legislature has been in session long enough and urging lawmakers to go home. This year, legislators and the public will have had the budget for only 14 weeks on May 1. That's not a lot of time for a large deliberative body to decide how to spend over \$4 billion.

Recommendation:

Members of the House and Senate should direct the governor to deliver the budget earlier, for example the first Tuesday after opening day. That will get the session off to a quicker start.