

Want to talk about the state's money? Budget plenty of time | AP National News

CHRIS CAROLA Associated Press



FILE - In a Monday, Feb. 5, 2018 file photo, Assemblyman William Magnarelli, D-Syracuse, left, and Assemblyman Michael Benedetto, D-Bronx, listen to testimony from Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren during a joint legislative budget hearing on local government, in Albany, N.Y. Some legislative hearings on the governor's spending proposals go on for up to 13 hours, giving the Empire State some of the nation's most drawn-out budget discussions. (AP Photo/Hans Pennink, File)

Hans Pennink

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — Need to be at a New York state budget hearing? Better not plan on doing much else that day.

Some legislative hearings on the governor's spending proposals go on for up to 13 hours, giving the Empire State some of the nation's most drawn-out budget discussions. Think marathons. And the scene at the finish line isn't always pretty.

ranking public officials testify first and can spend several hours being grilled by legislators. Representatives of various organizations testify next. The list of scheduled speakers can run to two or three dozen. Oftentimes, few lawmakers are still around to hear testimony, although hearings are livestreamed and archived on the [Senate](#) and [Assembly](#) websites.

Sen. Catherine Young, an upstate Republican, who as chairwoman of the Senate Finance Committee oversees budget hearings, acknowledged the process can be "grueling," but said the hearings "should be as long as it takes to get a thorough understanding of the governor's proposal in an open forum."

"It's the best system we have," she said.

That system varies from state to state. Some hold a handful of public hearings that only last a few hours. Other states, including Pennsylvania and California, hold several a week spread over a few months. In Wisconsin, the process includes taking the show on the road for four or five public hearings that can last a New York-like six to 12 hours at each stop.

Despite Skype and other high-tech video communication tools, there's no widespread movement on the state level to broaden their use for budget hearings, although some states are using conference call technology to allow people to testify remotely, according to the National Council of State Legislatures.

"That does not necessarily shorten the process. It just makes it more accessible for these citizens," said Brenda Erickson, the group's senior research analyst.

Assemblywoman Shelley Mayer, a Yonkers Democrat, says teleconferencing could be one way to make hearings less burdensome, especially for speakers who have to travel long distances. She's open to exploring other ways technology could be used to improve the process.

Common Cause's Lerner cautions against favoring technology over human contact in the public comment process.

"There's no substitute for people talking directly to other people," she said.

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"You're often talking to sleep-deprived, food-deprived legislators in a zombie-like state," said Blair Horner, executive director of the New York Public Interest Research Group and a veteran of 30-plus years of budget hearings.

Some advocates are now asking: Is there a better way?

"Rethinking the whole hearing thing would be huge," said Christopher Treiber, whose truncated five-minute testimony on behalf of people with developmental disabilities closed out a nearly nine-hour education hearing last month.

But despite similar grumbling over the years in several states, and moves to include remote testimony via computers and video, there is little evidence any have solved the problem.

At least one good-government group, Common Cause New York, has suggested allowing more meetings, at least two on each budget topic, with each of those meetings being more focused and having more room for public comment.

Still, cautioned the group's executive director Susan Lerner, "The issues are really, really complex. I hope they don't slapdash it."

New York state law requires public hearings on the governor's budget proposal. This year it's 13 scheduled sessions in January and February on a \$168 billion plan presented by Democratic Gov. Andrew Cuomo that includes such weighty matters as education and public safety. While there is an occasional two-hour sprint, most of the sessions run seven to 13 hours.

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