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No budget fix as Gov. Paterson, pols only bicker

By Kenneth Lovett and Glenn Blain

A special fix-the-budget session fizzled Tuesday as Gov. Paterson and legislative leaders fought and bickered, but did nothing to remedy the fiscal crisis.

"If it looks like a dysfunctional government and it acts like a dysfunctional government, it may actually be one," a frustrated Paterson said shortly before the brief session.

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Lawmakers left town without voting after a contentious meeting between the governor and legislative leaders led to no agreements.

Paterson ripped Senate Republican Majority Leader Dean Skelos for refusing to negotiate the past several weeks.

"You've brought us nothing," the normally amiable governor said. "You don't have anything on paper to show. You have nothing."

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Skelos shot back that his members were prepared to vote on a controversial \$2 billion package of cuts Paterson recently proposed, just like the governor asked on Monday before blinking when the GOP called his bluff.

"We are ready to act on your bills...and again you are accusing us of derailing the process," Skelos said.

He accused Democrats in the Assembly and Senate of not wanting to be put in the position of having to publicly oppose the governor's cuts.

Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver dismissed Skelos' comments as political theater. He and Paterson accused the Republican of hiding behind a bill he knew could not pass.

"Sen. Skelos is not interested in passing bills," Silver said. "He's interested in passing the buck."

Many Democrats say the lame-duck Senate majority's real intent was to put off making major cuts until January, when Democrats take control for the first time in 43 years.

In the end, Paterson acquiesced.

He said there likely would not be a session to discuss the budget until January. In the meantime, he will unveil on Dec. 16 his spending plan for the 2009-10 fiscal year that begins April 1.

"They're almost bickering and the budget deficit is growing by the minute," said Elizabeth Lynam of the Citizens Budget Commission.

Paterson called the special session to address a \$1.5 billion deficit in this year's budget that he says could balloon to \$2 billion, and up to \$15 billion next year.

Among the \$2 billion in cuts he proposed was \$1.4 billion in education and health care spending reductions.

Blair Horner, of the New York Public Interest Research Group, called the inaction "a colossal failure...by the governor and the Legislature to do what they are supposed to do, to solve people's problems."

A group of about 1,200 education, health care, public employee union and anti-poverty activists that descended on the Capitol praised Tuesday's inaction.

"The Legislature was responsible to say we have to have more conversations," said Billy Easton, executive director of the Alliance for Quality Education.