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Thumbs twiddle in Legislature's weirdest session

By Daniel Scarpinato

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PHOENIX — Next on Rep. Nancy Young Wright's to-do list: organize her budget briefing books.

Then she's got a stack of letters from school kids and constituents to respond to — individually.

The Oro Valley Democratic legislator has plenty of time for such tasks these days.

Usually around April, lawmakers are sifting through a flood of legislation. Or sprinting between committee hearings and press conferences.

But this year, hundreds of bills are at a standstill as all eyes focus on the state budget deficit — a \$3 billion problem that is being solved, legislative leaders say, behind closed doors by a few select individuals.

That's left some lawmakers with time to twiddle their thumbs during what veterans call the weirdest legislative session in memory.

"I'm feeling frustrated that there are times in my day that I have to find busy work rather than meaningful review of legislation," says Rep. Vic Williams, R-Tucson.

Some, though, say there could be a few positive results: Fewer quirky bills and more time to meet with constituents and study up on issues. Plus, the whole situation has forced lawmakers into discussions of the state's long-term priorities.

Still, the state Capitol is pretty quiet most days.

Some lawmakers get in early, before 9 a.m. Others just make sure they're in by 1 p.m. to mark their attendance.

It's kind of like an episode of Seinfeld. Remember? The show about nothing.

For Southern Arizona lawmakers, it's particularly annoying. Most make the commute up Interstate 10 Monday morning, driving home Thursday afternoon.

Unlike Phoenix-area legislators, they can't just run home for dinner. They're trapped. And for what?

"You come in, you sign, you leave," said Sen. Jorge Luis Garcia, D-Tucson, Senate minority leader. "If you don't want to come in on Thursday, don't come in on Thursday. That's what I tell folks."

When the session started in January, lawmakers sought to show they were taking the deficit seriously.

Senate President Bob Burns, R-Peoria, said he would not allow one non-budget bill to move forward, a commitment he has stood by — and one that has left hundreds of bills clogged in the legislative pipe.

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Rep. Vic Williams, on the standstill at the Legislature

In the Senate, legislators engage in daily floor soliloquies about the role of government and personal philosophy.

On Thursday, Sen. Meg Burton Cahill, D-Tempe, stood up three separate times to give speeches. Sen. Sylvia Allen, R-Snowflake, stood twice.

Senators did not have one bill or piece of business before them — other than the prayer and the pledge — but they spent nearly an hour talking.

The day before, Allen spoke about her opposition to the European Union.

"Worldwide socialism is not working — not working anywhere," she said.

Some have no patience, like Sen. Jonathan Paton, R-Tucson. He casts his attendance and then leaves the floor for meetings.

"It's a waste of time," Paton said. "I don't stay because I don't typically give speeches or listen to speeches about the federal government. That's not why I was elected."

Sen. Paula Aboud, D-Tucson, was out sick all last week. She didn't miss much.

"We're more stuck than I've ever seen us," Aboud said.

Most committee hearings have been canceled.

Aside from meetings they may set up on their own, lawmakers have no obligations other than pressing a little green button to show they're in the building.

Paton, chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, says he's managed to make the most of the downtime — holding hearings on drugs cartels and domestic violence, issues that would never get in-depth attention most years.

"You have to hear bills specifically, and you'd be rushing to get things through," he says.

Aboud says for the first time in her four sessions at the Capitol, lawmakers are talking about Arizona's future — even if they don't always agree.

"It's getting everybody focused on the direction of the state," she said. "We're doing our constitutionally obligated duty."

Young Wright says she's found plenty to keep her busy, from meeting with constituents to studying up on the state budget.

Some though, like Williams, worry that legislation they're sponsoring might fall through the cracks since everyone will be eager to adjourn once a budget is passed.

"We want to get back to our businesses, back to our families, back to our communities," he said. But Williams says some issues — such as his bill regarding spring training baseball in Tucson — are "time-sensitive."

Rep. Chad Campbell, D-Phoenix, House minority whip, thinks bills will disappear into a Capitol black hole. Whether that's a problem . . . well.

"I'm not saying it will be a bad thing at all," says Campbell, laughing. "It might even be a good thing."

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