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## Differences about lottery bubble up in budget talks

RALEIGH - Differences over a proposed state lottery surfaced from the budget negotiations Monday as time dwindled before an end-of-the-week deadline to approve a spending plan for state government.

North Carolina is the only East Coast state without a numbers game, but House and Senate leaders and Gov. Mike Easley – all Democrats – are trying to create one before the legislature adjourns for the year.

The House passed a lottery game in April by a two-vote margin. But the Senate approved a budget proposal in May that didn't create a lottery but eliminated an advertising ban and adjusted how net profits would be distributed only if that House bill ultimately passed.

Lawmakers for weeks have largely dismissed talk about lottery negotiations during the budget process, focusing on questions on health and education programs and state employee compensation.

But Senate leader Marc Basnight and House Speaker Jim Black both acknowledged Monday that the lottery was playing a role in finalizing a budget that could pass both chambers.

"It'd be real hard for us to pass a lottery (again) in any form," Mr. Black told reporters after meeting with Mr. Basnight on Monday afternoon.

Mr. Basnight said the Senate wants lottery language in the bill. The question is "will the House allow it to stay in the budget," he added.

Mr. Black predicted the only way a lottery can pass in the House is by persuading a handful of Democrats to agree to compromise language in the budget bill over spending the money. Then the Senate would have to approve the House stand-alone bill without any changes.

Changing how to spend the net revenues might be difficult. The House wanted money going to college scholarships, public school construction and other education programs. The Senate eliminated the scholarship idea and put aside money specifically for Mr. Easley's pet education initiatives.

Mr. Easley, who has sought a lottery since taking office in 2001, also wants minor changes to the stand-alone House bill. The governor would be asked to sign lottery and budget bills into law.

Mr. Black suggested that six to eight House Democrats who don't like any lottery language in the budget might be persuaded if Mr. Easley backs off his self-imposed spending cap in some areas. The cap, which would limit spending from last year's budget to increase by no

more than 5.6 percent, has forced negotiations to make tens of millions of dollars in spending cuts to programs dear to the House.

Mr. Easley and legislative leaders have different views on what spending items should be considered in the cap.

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