

## S.C. Legislature Secretive When it Comes to Chamber Spending Plans

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by Rick Brundrett - The Nerve

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At least 100 state agencies have filed budget requests for the next fiscal year that begins July 1, [online](#) records show.

But the S.C. House and Senate aren't among them – despite a longstanding [state law](#) requiring all

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agencies to annually file budget requests with the governor by Nov 1. Both the 124-member House and 46-member Senate typically have ignored that law, as The Nerve previously has [reported](#).  
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The law says that by Nov. 1 of each year, agencies “receiving or asking (for) financial aid” from the state must report to the governor – in recent years by way of the Department of Administration’s Executive Budget Office – “an estimate in itemized form showing the amount needed” for the upcoming fiscal year.

The Legislature also routinely has disregarded another longstanding [state law](#) requiring the budget-writing House Ways and Means and Senate Finance committees to hold joint, open hearings on the governor’s proposed annual state budget within five days after receiving it.

The House and Senate are flush with money for their respective chambers. For this fiscal year, the House’s budget is \$22.7 million, including a \$250,000 increase, while the Senate’s budget is \$16.3 million, including separate hikes of \$1.25 million and \$250,000.

On top of that, as of June 30, the House had general and “other” fund reserves of \$23.3 million – more than its current total budget – and \$247,024, respectively. The Senate’s general and “other” fund surpluses were \$5.2 million and \$726,713, respectively, state Comptroller General’s Office and Department of Administration records show.

It remains to be seen whether House and Senate leaders will seek for their own chamber coffers a chunk of the projected extra \$1.8 billion in general fund revenues for fiscal 2020-21. This fiscal year’s total state budget, which includes federal, state and “other” funds, such as fines and fees, is more than \$30 billion.

The Nerve last week [revealed](#) that next fiscal year’s requests collectively include millions for promoting a professional golf tournament, businesses, and products, plus taxpayer-funded incentives for companies to locate or expand in the state.

As for the House and Senate chamber budget requests for 2020-21, The Nerve last week requested details from Senate clerk Jeff Gossett and acting House clerk Charles Reid, who left his longtime clerk’s position earlier this year to become president of the private South Carolina Business & Industry Political Education Committee, but recently resumed his former House role.

Gossett didn’t respond to The Nerve’s request. Richard Pearce, staff attorney for the House clerk, in a written response Friday said there are “no documents in the possession of the House related” to next fiscal year’s proposed chamber budget. Pearce didn’t directly answer The Nerve’s question about why the chamber, unlike other state agencies, doesn’t submit its spending plan in advance to the Department of Administration for public viewing.

Asked this week whether the House and Senate provided budget requests to the Department of Administration, agency spokeswoman Kelly Coakley in a written response said only, “All budget

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requests for FY 2020-21 received by the Executive Budget Office are posted on our website.”

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The Nerve cited the law requiring state agencies to provide their budget requests to the governor by Nov. 1, though Coakley in her written response replied, “You will need to direct your questions regarding the House and Senate to the House and Senate.”

Legislative leaders typically have been tight-lipped about publicly revealing their respective chamber spending plans in advance. When The Nerve earlier this year, for example, asked Gossett under the state Freedom of Information Act for details of a proposed \$1.25 million hike for the Senate chamber – which eventually was approved by the Legislature – he responded in writing that there were “no records responsive to this request.”

As the top administrators of their respective chambers, Gossett and Reid made \$206,016 and \$191,172, respectively last year. The Nerve in October 2018 [reported](#) that including Gossett and Reid, 27 staffers in both chambers were earning at least \$100,000, and that the total number of employees earning at least \$50,000 had grown by 25 since 2015.

The Nerve obtained those records under the Freedom of Information Act. Unlike most other state agencies, the House and Senate chambers don’t provide their staff salaries for the [online](#) state salary database, maintained by the Department of Administration.

As The Nerve has previously [reported](#), the House and Senate in recent years have bypassed the normal budget process for their own chamber budgets, often waiting until after the legislative session starts in January before publicly releasing their proposed spending plans for the upcoming fiscal year.

By law, the governor is supposed to review agency budget requests before submitting his or her state budget version to lawmakers, though they largely ignore it and draft their own spending plans. A final legislative version eventually is sent to the governor, who can issue line-item vetoes.

Lawmakers, however, usually override most budget vetoes.

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