Follow the Fun at the Special Session

The special session is on. Gov. Frank O’Bannon called a special session of the Indiana General Assembly to deal with property tax reassessment, tax restructuring and the revenue shortfall. The legislators convened in Indianapolis on May 14. Then, they adjourned, and most of them left town.

They didn’t just give up. Remember your lessons from school on how a bill becomes a law? The Indiana Constitution says that tax legislation must begin in the House. There’s only one bill being considered, House Bill 1001, and it’s a tax bill. That means the Senate has nothing to do until the House passes a bill, so there’s no reason for the 50 senators to stick around. They adjourned “until the fall of the gavel,” which is legislature-talk for “we’ll meet when we meet.”

Tax bills usually must be considered in the Ways and Means Committee before getting to the full House. There’s nothing for the other House members to do until that committee agrees on a bill. The House has adjourned until June 3. If there’s a bill passed out of committee, members will debate it then. If they pass it, then the Senate will meet.

The Senate’s version of the bill (if it passes one) could be very different from the House version, because the Senate can amend the bill as much as it wants. The two versions would have to be reconciled in a conference committee. The compromise bill (if the committee agrees on one) goes back to each house for a final vote, and if it passes, then the governor gets to sign it (unless he vetoes it, which seems pretty unlikely).

If you want to watch the fun, follow this process over the Internet.

Start with the General Assembly’s Web site at <www.ai.org/legislative>. Click on “Calendars” to find out when the legislature and committees are meeting. Click on “Bills and Resolutions” to see what House Bill 1001 says. Type “1001” in the “Go to Bill” box, and you’ll see a digest of the bill and links to what’s happening to it. The “Action List” tells you where the bill is in the process.

You can read the entire bill, if you like. But HB1001 is long and hard to understand. Instead, try the “Fiscal Impact Statement.” It will have a summary of the bill, as well as a rundown of what the bill is expected to do to revenues and expenditures. This usually tells us more about what a bill does than the legalese in the bill itself.
So far, this is pretty dry—procedures, bills and fiscal statements. What about personalities and politics? Once the House and Senate actually convene, you can listen to the debate. Click on “Listen to the Indiana General Assembly Online” shown on the legislature’s homepage. “Calendars” will tell you when it’s in session.

WFYI in Indianapolis airs a show called “Indiana Week in Review,” which covers Statehouse doings. It’s on at 8 p.m. Fridays, but you can watch it any time over the Internet. Just go to <www.wfyi.org>, click on “Streaming Media,” then “Indiana Week in Review.” The panelists on this show talk mostly politics. Sometimes they also show newscasts from the Statehouse, though, so you can see O’Bannon, Bauer, Borst and company in action.

The Indianapolis Star probably will have an article on each day’s meetings, too. With the Internet, you don’t have to wait for the morning paper to see it. The Star’s site is <www.indystar.com>. Click on “News” in the upper left-hand corner if the Statehouse article isn’t one of the top headlines.

Ed Feigenbaum is an Indianapolis journalist who publishes newsletters covering Indiana government in detail. His Web site makes some of these news nuggets available for free. Go to <www.ingrouponline.com>, and click on “Indiana Daily Insight.”

The papers usually say that the special session can only last 40 days, so it must be done by June 22. But it doesn’t matter much. If the legislature hasn’t satisfied the governor by the time the session ends, he can call them back for a second special session. If there’s no compromise, this could go on all summer.

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