

Amid the stagnation of biennial budget negotiations and the looming June 17 deadline by which a budget would need to be enacted in order to avoid a veto and “state shutdown,” the presiding officers of the 128th Maine Legislature have named a “Committee of Conference” in hopes of furthering negotiations. Committees of Conference are regularly called on individual pieces of legislation between three or so members of a joint standing policy committee, albeit much more informally. However, this working group is intended to be much more formal and will include three members from each legislative body: The Senate will contribute Republicans President Mike Thibodeau and Sen. Roger Katz, as well as Democrat Cathy Breen. House Speaker Sara Gideon has named herself to the Committee of Conference, along with Democratic Rep. Aaron Frey and Republican Rep. Tom Winsor.

The Committee met Tuesday, June 13, at 7:00 p.m., a short while after its membership had been named. They outlined the scope of their work and the timeline they must abide by in order to avoid a shutdown. Speaker Gideon listed among the Committee’s scope education funding mechanisms (specifically, how it relates to last year’s referendum Question #2), education policy, the total amount of money spent on education, budgetary impacts on property taxes, and the total sum of the budget. However, Sen. Breen made it known her colleagues in the Senate Democratic caucus objected to education policy being a part of the discussion. Speaker Gideon also told the committee the scope could be broadened to include matters not currently part of the budgetary fight.

Office of Fiscal and Program Review Director Chris Nolan explained to the Committee that they should work toward a deal that could be enacted by the Legislature no later than 5:00 p.m. Friday evening, June 16. This would ensure his office would have the time necessary to draft the massive document. This has been adopted by the Committee as their goal.

The entrance of Appropriations & Financial Affairs Committee members Sen. Breen and Rep. Winsor to the Committee of Conference has meant that the Senate Democratic and House Republican caucuses have been deprived of their AFA “leads.” Sen. Bill Diamond has assumed Breen’s role on the committee and AFA member Rep. Stedman Seavey will serve as his caucuses lead. This is important because, as of last night, AFA chairs and leaders were meeting to “close” 12 final unvoted areas in the budget. AFA can no longer take budget votes as they have officially reported out budget documents already, but there was a verbal agreement that the chairs and leads’ recommendations would be given to the Committee of Conference and incorporated into the budget along with any other amendments.

The Committee of Conference will meet at 9:00 a.m. Wednesday morning to begin negotiating. Its members will not be present for legislative session so long as this work is ongoing, and roll calls in both legislative chambers are expected to be tabled until their work is finished.