

EDITORIALS

Keep budget date

■ Later submission for county plan would crimp public debate.

Changing Monroe County's budget submission date wasn't a good idea two years ago, and it's not a good idea now.

Majority Republicans in the legislature have brought back a flawed plan to delay mandated presentation of the budget by more than a month — from the second Tuesday in October to Nov. 15. Budget approval is needed by mid-December to accommodate a Jan. 1 start to the fiscal year.

The flaw in this idea should be as clear as the \$102 million deficit the county could face over the next two years.

A later budget submission reduces the ability of the public and affected agencies — those that rely on county funding — to comment on what's proposed. It squeezes the time the legislature has to review the plan, consider the concerns and objections of the public and, if necessary, to amend the budget. It limits the ability of County Executive Maggie Brooks to negotiate changes with lawmakers, to debate alterations — in short, to come up with the best budget taxpayers' money can buy.

Brooks seemingly understands the value of having adequate time to consider budget matters. This year, well in advance of the 2007 and 2008 county budgets that she accurately warned could be steeped in deficit, Brooks' team sought the public's advice about how to cope with the red ink. She chose not to push off consideration of these ideas, presumably because she knows that it takes time to assimilate them, to debate solutions and to respond to critiques.

Why that thinking doesn't also apply to annual budget submissions is hard to fathom. Unless one makes the political calculation. Putting off submission until Nov. 15 takes the budget — the primary task of the legislature each year — out of the campaign mix. Majority Republican incumbents wouldn't have to defend a GOP county executive's proposal. Democrats wouldn't be handed a convenient campaign cudgel.

Actually, proponents of the later date seem to think it's a good idea to keep the budget away from campaign sparring. To the contrary, this is precisely the sort of sparring voters deserve.

A later submission date serves politicians first and citizens last. It should fade away — and stay away this time. □