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The games being played by House Republicans to avoid passing a budget that makes sense will work only if Pennsylvanians stop paying attention. Unfortunately, after three months of a stalemate more about politics than the state's structural deficit, many already have.

The achievements of an organization are the results of the combined effort of each individual. ~ Vince Lombardi

TEAMWORK









Pennsylvania ran out of money last year and had to borrow money this year because it hasn't matched revenue to spending. Some combination of cutting spending and increasing revenue would cause the least pain to residents, who don't want to see taxes go up or essential services decreased. But House Speaker Mike Turzai (R., Allegheny) doesn't seem to care. It has become apparent he won't take any step that he believes would negatively affect his chances to become the state's next governor.

Most of Turzai's compadres in the House Republican caucus don't have to worry about reelection. Pennsylvania's gerrymandered legislative districts have virtually guaranteed their victories. But, following his lead, they oppose any revenue



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measure levied against their political donors, including the fracking industry. Instead, they have proposed a wide array of **spending cuts and money transfers** that don't stand up to scrutiny.

For example, the House plan would transfer to the General Fund \$8.3 million from the state's settlement with Mylan Pharmaceuticals for overcharging allergy sufferers who bought EpiPens for emergency use. That money is supposed to help replenish Pennsylvania's Medicaid fund. Or do poor, sick Pennsylvanians matter to the Republicans?

Their plan also includes \$1.2 million from the settlement with Nationwide Mutual Insurance Co. for a data breach that released the personal information of 36,000 state residents. But that case involved 33 states that will share \$5.5 million. Attorney General Josh Shapiro said **Pennsylvania's share was \$249,000**. It's as though House Republicans made up numbers to reach the \$2.4 billion needed to clear the state's deficits from last year and this one. There was no concern for the impact on agencies and programs whose funds would be raided.

Taking **\$30 million from the Pennsylvania Infrastructure Bank** will delay needed transportation projects. Taking \$25 million from the Small Business First Fund will reduce loans to small businesses. Taking \$75 million from the Recycling Fund will delay the cleanup of illegal waste dumps. Is it even legal to take money from programs with dedicated purposes, like the Keystone Recreation Park and Conservation Fund, which the Republicans want to milk for \$100 million; or the Public Transportation Trust Fund, which they propose tapping for \$357 million?

Given Pennsylvania's dire straits, it must evaluate every expenditure and fund to make sure money is spent wisely. But one-time fixes and fund transfers won't solve a long-term problem. It's a good bet that more gambling and some privatization of the state liquor business will become part of the solution. A progressive income tax may be a bridge too far. But taxing enterprises that should and can afford to pay more should be a given. It would be, if politics were left out of the equation. – ***Philadelphia Inquirer editorial***

A bipartisan proposed bill in the Ohio Senate would make \$100 million available to expand broadband into communities without high-speed internet access.

About 300,000 rural Ohio households and 88,500 businesses lack broadband - getting online through slower dial-up **or satellite service**. They visit public libraries and work on their mobile devices if they want higher speeds. Sens. Joe Schiavoni, a Boardman Democrat who is also **running for governor**, and Cliff Hite, a Findlay Republican, said a lack of broadband - which comes by way of cable, fiber and wireless technologies - is an impediment that leaves students, job seekers and businesses behind.

Telecommunications companies hesitate to expand broadband into rural areas. It typically costs about \$26,000 a mile to lay down fiber. If an area only has six houses - and studies show maybe four of the six will sign up for high-speed service once it arrives - it takes over 13 years for a company charging \$50 a month to begin to see a return on the investment, said Stu Johnson, a vice president with Connect Ohio, a nonprofit with a mission to help Ohio advance and adopt high-speed internet. The bill, which will be made public in a week or so, would subsidize the cost of internet infrastructure, Hite said.

The measure would create a \$50 million-a-year, two-year grant program for communities, economic development organizations, nonprofits and other groups interested in improving internet in the area. The money would come from the Ohio Third Frontier program, a state borrowing program. Grants would be up to \$5 million per group.

The groups can install the internet infrastructure and then find a telecommunications company to offer internet service. Or they can work with a telecommunications company to install the broadband infrastructure. Johnson of Connect Ohio said there would flexibility in the bill to help communities make decisions that would work best for them.

The lawmakers estimate 14,000 Ohio households could receive broadband under the plan. The state would be required, under the bill, to award grants based on a group's financial solvency and if there are no private-sector plans to expand internet access to the area, among other factors. Schiavoni said Rep. Ryan Smith, the influential chairman of the House Finance Committee, is working on a similar bill in the House with Rep. Jack Cera, a Bellaire Democrat. "It's time we just stop talking about making this a priority," Schiavoni said. "And now we're actually going to put some funding behind it," he said. – ***Cleveland Plain Dealer***

The National Football League has never had an off-season like 2017.

League officials spent a nervous spring and summer plotting to ensure that the season beginning Thursday is nothing like 2016, a year when the NFL's aura of invincibility cracked. Television audiences declined and empty seats dotted stadiums as the league confronted problems including increased media competition, continuing questions about player safety, and controversial player protests during the national anthem.

Suddenly desperate to right its ship, the league sought advice from its media partners to design a season they hope will start strong and gain momentum. The schedule is packed with attractive games in prime-time slots, especially in September and October, to get fans hooked early. The league and its television partners also moved forward with a plan to cut the number of commercial breaks and made several other moves to improve the flow of the game. The networks shuffled announcers in search of voices that would appeal to younger fans. On the field, penalties for innocuous touchdown celebrations—moments tailor-made for viral videos—were done away with. “This was very detailed, very thorough, and very sincere,” said Burke Magnus, ESPN's executive vice president for scheduling and programming.

The stakes are high for a league that has been secure in its supreme status for decades. “This season is really a big indication of was last year just a misnomer, or is that the trend moving forward?” said Steve Rosner, partner of 16W Marketing, which represents NFL broadcasting talent such as Phil Simms and Boomer Esiason.

Network chiefs are as anxious as their league counterparts. NBC Sports president Mark Lazarus, who hopes to use the NFL as a launching pad for the Winter Olympics in February, said it was important that ratings bounce back this year. “Every Sunday night I am up all night waiting to see what our numbers are,” he said. “We get our report card every Monday morning and I want high marks.”

Designing a more appealing schedule is a key part of the fix. Brian Rolapp, chief media and business officer for the NFL, said the league tries to heed its media partners' wishes every year, though it's difficult to give each network all the matchups it wants. “I enter every season optimistic but a lot depends on what happens on the field,” Rolapp said. For 2017, Magnus said ESPN demanded more support for Monday Night Football, once the league's premier showcase. The network pushed for more divisional and intra-conference games aiming “to return Monday Football to the position where we think it should be.”

The league had little choice but to grant many of those wishes this season, not just because ESPN pays the NFL \$1.9 billion a year on average for the Monday night games. Even though NFL games remained the most popular shows on television, ratings plummeted for the first half of the season before rebounding somewhat over the final two months. Average viewership per game fell 8% overall. Ratings for Monday night games on ESPN and Thursday night games on the NFL Network dropped 12% and 14%, respectively. NBC Sunday Night Football's audience dropped 10%.

The NFL has some built-in security: The league's \$27.9 billion deal with CBS, Fox and NBC runs through 2022. However, its \$450 million deal with the NBC and CBS for its slate of Thursday night games, which can also be seen on the NFL Network, ends after this season, providing additional urgency for a rebound. A one-year pact with Amazon to stream Thursday night games also expires after this year.

This season kicks off Thursday night with a match-up between the Super Bowl champion New England Patriots and Kansas City Chiefs, a division champ last year. Five of New England's games are scheduled for prime-time slots, including a week seven Super Bowl rematch with the Falcons on a Sunday night. The Dallas Cowboys are in prime slots five times, including a first-week showdown with the New York Giants. The Atlanta Falcons and Green Bay Packers, who met in the last season's NFC Championship game, face off in week two. ESPN's Monday Night Football matchups in September feature the Cowboys, Denver Broncos and New York Giants.

Meanwhile, the perennially awful Cleveland Browns and Jacksonville Jaguars aren't slotted in prime time at all. Other bad teams from last season, including the New York Jets, San Francisco 49ers and Los Angeles Rams, appear just once. To keep things moving during broadcasts, the NFL has standardized halftime at 13 minutes, 30 seconds, rather than allowing it to fluctuate in certain games and stadiums; introduced a 40-second play clock after a touchdown and prior to extra point; and centralized replay review in New York City. Networks can use what is known as “double-box advertising,” allowing fans to watch the field during a commercial.

The NFL can't manage away all of its challenges. The league and the networks blamed much 2016's audience decline on the oxygen-sucking presidential election. While the election may be long over, President Donald Trump continues to dominate national attention. Michael Nathanson, a media analyst, said "the expectations that the news cycle post-election would dissipate clearly has not yet come to fruition."

Using a regression analysis that accounts for the rankings of each team and other metrics, Nathanson projects the league's prime-time audiences will grow. "But if the prime-time schedule is strong, the Sunday afternoon numbers could be a little soft," he said. The league's dicier problems also have not abated. The controversy over quarterback Colin Kaepernick, whose decision to kneel during the national anthem to protest racial injustice sparked boycotts, has lingered, if not grown. Kaepernick is currently unsigned and groups of players in multiple NFL cities knelt during the anthem in the weeks following the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville.

This summer, days after the league's billion-dollar concussion settlement with former players went into effect, a damning new study in the Journal of the American Medical Association moved the issue of player health and safety back to the fore. Two days later, Baltimore Ravens offensive lineman John Urschel decided to retire. More than anything, perhaps, the league needs to find a new narrative that will capture casual fans—"Who Can Beat the Patriots?" has been around for 15 years—and a new generation of stars to fill the void left by the Peyton Manning and, eventually, Tom Brady.

The Cowboys' breakout last year—led by two rookies, quarterback Dak Prescott and running back Ezekiel Elliott—has been undercut by the league's disciplinary battle with Elliott. The NFL this summer suspended Elliott for six games over his alleged assault of a former girlfriend. But Elliott is slated to play in the first week of the season as his appeal to the league and a related court fight are still unresolved. There are other emerging stars. Tampa Bay's Jameis Winston and Tennessee's Marcus Mariota are trendy bets for MVP. The re-birth of the long-struggling Oakland Raiders is tantalizing, especially with the transcendent linebacker Khalil Mack. But the team's planned move to Las Vegas could dampen enthusiasm within its fan base.

Network executives are also trying to devise new winning plays. CBS Sports President Sean McManus said he took out a blank piece of paper to redo pairings of play-by-play and analysts. That's how he wound up what might be the most-talked about move of the entire NFL offseason—replacing Jim Nantz's partner and former New York Giants star Phil Simms on the network's lead broadcast team. That blockbuster acquisition to give audiences a younger and fresher voice for the network's biggest games: Tony Romo. – *Wall Street Journal*

