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Sudden Death Overtime

After months of kicking the budget proposals back and forth among the House and Senate caucuses and Governor Rendell, the clock has played out, and negotiations are in sudden death overtime. And as any sports fan can attest, this game could go either way, even though no one initially thought the underdog had a chance.

The two plans that are now in play couldn't be more different. Will the representatives and senators try to balance the budget on the backs of the volunteer fire companies, American Legion and VFW posts, and local theatre companies and musical events, or will they pass a tax that will barely touch the bottom lines of the multi-national natural gas drillers? Will the legislators turn control of our state forests over to the gas industry, ultimately making companies like ExxonMobil even richer than they already are, or will they allow the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) to continue to be a good steward of the land we all lay claim to? Will the legislators listen to the tassel-shoed Harrisburg insiders who have spent more than \$1 million in lobbying for the mega gas drillers, or will they listen to the outcry of citizens in every county in Pennsylvania?

We should know the answers to all these questions by Friday morning. The House expects to vote today and tomorrow on a bill to tax large gas drillers in the Marcellus Shale formation. Our legislators are also expected to vote on an amendment that will use this tax to help fill the gaping hole in our state budget, with all income going to the general fund for most of the first two years. After that, the money will be split with half going to the general fund; 20 percent to our environmental agencies that protect our land, air, and water, including DCNR, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), the Department of Agriculture (specifically for farmland preservation), and to PennVEST (funding sewer, storm water and drinking water projects throughout the Commonwealth); 20 percent to local governments to help fund the costs of

“hosting” drilling operations, and to county conservation districts and fire and ambulance companies in the same areas; 4 percent to LIHEAP, which helps low income people pay their heating bills; and 3 percent each to the Fish and Boat Commission and the Game Commission.

As any underdog team knows, it's a miracle that the Marcellus Shale tax proposal has made it this far. It's not in the three caucus plan that Governor Rendell and the Senate and House Democratic and the Senate Republican leadership announced last week. Citizens groups have been enormously outspent by the lobbyists from the drilling industry. And with the industry dangling jobs in front of legislators – despite the fact that most of the drilling jobs have gone to non-Pennsylvanians – it has been hard to make our elected officials understand that a severance tax, just like nearly every other major gas producing state already has, was a better way to go.

But the big boys with the big bucks weren't prepared for the underdog citizens being so focused, and so unrelenting. And they clearly weren't prepared for the courageous legislators (many of them members of the new Green Dog Caucus) led by Representatives Dave Levdansky (D – Allegheny, Washington), Greg Vitali (D – Delaware) and Bud George (D – Clearfield), who have carried the ball so far. They certainly weren't prepared for the game to go into sudden death overtime.

But it has. The next two days will make the difference. To win, the underdogs will need every member of the team, and every supporter of the team, playing and cheering as loudly as they can.

This certainly isn't Harrisburg business as usual, but a whole new ball game.

Game on.

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