

Ohio Democrats push for hundreds of changes as Senate reworks state budget

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Cleveland.com

COLUMBUS, Ohio -- Outnumbered at the Statehouse, Ohio Democrats are fighting to influence a \$61 billion budget they say is packed with giveaways and sweeping policy changes.

"We see that budget as broken promises, handouts for the wealthy," said Senate Minority Leader Nickie Antonio, a Cleveland Democrat.

Her caucus has filed 423 amendments to the 5,000-page bill. Amendments are one of the only ways Democrats can try to shape the state's massive two-year spending plan. But with limited votes, they'll need Republican support to make any changes stick.

Democrats hold only nine of the Senate's 33 seats. In the House, they have 34 of 99.

"We all enjoy good working relationships," Antonio said. "I think what's different about this budget is so much policy, so much policy change."

Unlike in past years, Democrats [didn't offer a single vote](#) for the House's version of the budget, which passed in April. The GOP plan included \$600 million in state bonds for a [new covered Cleveland Browns stadium](#) in Brook Park, expanded funding for both public schools and private vouchers, and a host of Medicaid revisions.

It was also a sharp departure from [Gov. Mike DeWine's budget](#), which didn't include stadium bonds. Instead, DeWine suggested raising the sports betting tax to create a dedicated fund for stadium projects. He also proposed increasing the tobacco tax to help pay for a new child tax credit.

She and her fellow Democrats submitted an amendment to reinstate that tax credit as well as one to remove the bonds for the Browns stadium.

"Our colleagues are prioritizing their [rich supporters](#)," Antonio said.

But it's not just Democrats who oppose the bonds.

A handful of House Republicans voted against the budget, at least in part over the stadium money.

House Finance Chair Brian Stewart, an Ashville Republican, has called the stadium "a once-in-a-lifetime project" and a major economic driver.

"This is going to be a destination center," Stewart told reporters in April. "I really do think when the ribbon is cut and people walk through the door, I think they'll be glad it's in Ohio."

He has said the team will pay off the bonds at no cost to taxpayers but critics questioned whether that promise would hold up. The Browns have said the stadium and surrounding \$1 billion private development will generate enough new state tax revenue to cover the cost of repaying the bonds, though both [the state budget office](#) and [nonpartisan legislative researchers](#) have questioned the projections.

Republican state Sen. Jerry Cirino of Lake County has similar concerns about being on the hook for those bonds. He's the Senate's point person on the budget. He told Cleveland.com that he's working on a plan for the stadium funding but declined to share the details.

Senate budget changes are expected in early June. The two chambers must reconcile differences in their spending proposals before the start of the new state fiscal year on July 1.

The House budget also included language requiring the state to [end Medicaid expansion](#) if the federal government ever reduces its share of funding.

That's prompted pushback from Democrats like state Sen. Beth Liston, a Dublin physician and budget committee member, who has been working with Senate Republicans to soften the requirement.

She's pushing to change the word "shall" to "may," which would give the state more flexibility in responding to federal policy changes.

Liston is also fighting to preserve a rule that allows children under age 3 to stay continuously enrolled in Medicaid without having to reverify their eligibility. She estimated that nearly 20,000 infants and toddlers could lose coverage if that rule is eliminated.

Liston said she's had productive conversations with Senate Republicans about the Medicaid provisions and is hopeful some of the concerns will be addressed when the Senate releases its version of the budget.