

## Another special session still an option

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BATON ROUGE -- For the New Orleans Saints fan, the motto is "Wait 'til next year." For the Louisiana Legislature, it's "Wait 'til next session."

The special session that ended Tuesday saw 438 bills and resolutions, \$960 million cut from the state budget, tax breaks and tax holidays, changes in insurance, and money shuffled to and from hurricane-affected areas -- all in 17 days.

As the special session wound to a close, numerous lawmakers referred to another special session in January almost daily. But the chances of another special session moved from a near-certainty to a maybe by the time the House and Senate adjourned almost an hour before the 6 p.m. deadline Tuesday.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco said she would not rule out the possibility of a second special session to deal with more hurricane issues.

"I think we need to leave that option open," she said.

At least three things could prompt another special session, including:

A serious miscalculation of the state budget deficit. The \$960 million in budget cuts were aimed at a target set by the Revenue Estimating Conference's projection of the impact of hurricanes Katrina and Rita on the state's tax collections. The full effect on the state's revenues will become clearer over time, and state officials are concerned that more budget cuts will need to be made.

The state is counting on a large amount of help from the federal government that has not cleared Congress. If that aid -- it would include more money for housing, a topic not included in this special session -- fails to come through, Louisiana officials would have to scramble to come up with an alternate plan.

Various tax incentives doled out during the special session could add to the budget woes. Lawmakers approved nearly \$190 million in tax breaks, and that could come back to haunt the state operating budget.

"Really, the only things that would make a January special session necessary would be if the revenues were off more than projected or if the federal government did something to make the budget a whole lot better or a whole lot worse," said Jim Brandt, president of Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana.

Blanco's decision to broaden the call for the special session that began Nov. 6 may have eliminated much of the need for another special session.

"We may need one, maybe later in January or early February," House Speaker Joe Salter, D-Florien, said. "We'd like to push as much of it as we reasonably can into the regular session."

The next regular session begins March 27.