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Outside eyes to look at Monroe County finances

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Monroe County Legislature Democrats were successful on Wednesday in securing a commitment from county administrators to let outside auditors meet with a budget task force.

The first meeting of a six-member bipartisan budget workgroup was more civil than the announcement for the group, which was marred by competing news releases and charges of noncooperation and insincerity from both parties.

Still, differences remain between the sides regarding the goals for the group.

"My hope is we can find some places to find that \$20 million," said Legislator Dan Quatro, R-Webster, who added he didn't want to wait for the administration to act.

Republicans see the group as a way to bring budget ideas forward. Democrats believe they are there to review the administration's budget plans once an alternative for 2008 is presented.

"We view these as information-gathering sessions," said Legislator Carrie Andrews, D-Rochester. "We always maintained that our purpose is to review the budget, not produce one."

The workgroup was convened in light of the county's potential fiscal crisis. The county is waging a legal battle to uphold County Executive Maggie Brook's sales tax intercept plan dubbed F.A.I.R.

If the county loses, it would have to pay \$29 million to school districts, money not currently in the budget.

The Legislature unanimously passed legislation demanding that the Brooks administration develop a budget alternative, or Plan B, for 2008. That document won't be provided until the county's legal options have expired, according to county officials.

Democrats said they would like to see budget information when Republicans do and with the same level of access.

Democrats often charge that they do not have access to the same information as Republican lawmakers. Republicans hold a majority in the legislature and control the county executive's office.

Democrats asked to meet with the county's outside auditor, KPMG, to gain an unvarnished look at county finances. The request was first met with resistance from county Finance Director Stephen Gleason, who

said KPMG wouldn't be able to speak about county finances beyond what is contained in the audit, which already is available to the lawmakers.

Lawmakers from both sides of the aisle agreed to call the auditors in anyway.

The county's budget officials also fielded questions, mostly from Democrats, about which county spending is mandated by the state or federal government and which is not. Democrats also questioned why, for example, some of the legislature's costs are labeled as "mandated" in some budgets and "non-mandated" in others.