

Gazette editorial: So much for efficient GOP leadership

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Republicans took control of West Virginia's Legislature — and the result has been arguably the worst flop in state history.

Conservatives squandered the entire 2016 regular session on far-right “God, guns and gays” nonsense, hurting people and fanning hostilities — but they failed their basic constitutional duty to fund the state government.

Almost \$100 million was bled from the emergency Rainy Day Fund to keep the state functional through the old fiscal year, which ends June 30. But GOP lawmakers wouldn't raise revenue to cure a \$270 million shortfall in the next budget. After the regular session, Gov. Tomblin gave legislative leaders time to reach a budget agreement — but they failed — so he called a special budget session, which has been another failure.

Lawmakers wasted nearly a half-million taxpayer dollars in the two-week extra session, then they pulled a cop-out: They voted to bleed \$245 million more from the Rainy Day Fund and other one-time money. Then they dumped it in the governor's lap and left town. The cop-out was called “cowardly” because it avoided obtaining more revenue. Tomblin is expected to veto it. If he doesn't, without new taxes, the 2017 shortfall is forecast at \$380 million.

What's next? Can anything head off a government shutdown in three weeks? Republican Delegate Ron Walters of Kanawha County warned:

“Come July 1, if a budget isn't passed, 760,000 West Virginians will lose their health insurance. On July 1, the State Police don't work. Public employees quit working The result will be so catastrophic we will never recover.”

Boone County schools already are on the brink of bankruptcy, and many other state services hang in limbo.

Is this what Republican rule is giving the Mountain State? It's grotesque. Other states may look at West Virginia as a pathetic object lesson.

The crisis arose because former legislators erased \$300 million in business taxes — then revenue from coal and gas faded. Current lawmakers can't be blamed for the shortage, but they're guilty of failing to repair the damage and obey the constitution by raising revenue. Republicans vowed to solve the deficit by purging “fraud and waste,” but they couldn't really find any.

All West Virginians should watch carefully to see whether the GOP-led Legislature drags the state into a ruinous nightmare.