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Remember those little paint-by-number kits we used to have as a kid, you know, the ones designed to make people challenged by the thought of even drawing a stick figure look like Van Gogh?

Essentially that's what taxpayers in New York got this past week when lawmakers finally approved a state budget plan. By brushing in a little blue here, offering a little orange there, and packing in a little purple around the edges, senators and assemblyman apparently believe they came up with a masterpiece in figuring out how to collect and spend more than \$101 billion. Of course, the formula they follow is rooted in making sure their careers continue uninterrupted and unchallenged, not in what might actually create a strategic and balanced fiscal landscape we can all live with.

Taking that lead, here's a look at Albany's version of this year's Mona Lisa – by the numbers:

Zero: Number of Albany politicians who are embarrassed by their complete relinquishment of responsibility, or worse yet, number of voters who actually seem to care.

4: Percentage of sales tax the state will continue to collect on clothes purchases under \$110, despite a promise that the “temporary” tax would expire in May of this year. What is it that lawmakers, or more directly voters, don't get about the word temporary? For the record, it will amount to just under \$500 million more out of your pocket and mine.

5.2: Percentage increase in public school funding in this year's budget over last. Because, obviously, we've learned that throwing money at it is the best way to solve our educational issues.

6: Estimate, in billions of dollars, of a still projected state budget deficit, despite the addition of more than \$850 million in new fees and taxes.

8: Number of new video lottery terminal gambling halls left out of the final spending compromise.

37.5: In millions of dollars, amount legislators rejected in Medicaid savings, after the governor had proposed cutting out some podiatry and dental services presently covered in the country's most ridiculously lavish yet fiscally crippling health care program.

10: In perhaps the most shocking number of all, amount in billions of dollars of this budget over Governor Pataki's proposed budget of just one year ago! Is it any wonder no one believes that governments at virtually every level are in the throes of economic disintegration?

23: Cost, in millions, of a new parking garage in Albany so all those state workers will have a more convenient place to park.

120: Number of vetoes issued in 2003 by George Pataki after legislators finally presented him with a budget proposal.

120: Number of Pataki budget vetoes overridden by the legislature in 2003.

210: Rough estimate – maybe a little low -- of the number of state senators and assemblymen who will be re-elected to office this November.

212: Total number up for re-election.

399: Additional increase in fees and taxes, in millions of dollars, proposed by Governor Pataki, but actually rejected by legislators, who figured taking 90 percent of the pie was better than gorging on the whole thing.

515: Page on which \$200 million in unitemized member “slush fund” monies were appropriated, as part of an even lengthier transportation and economic development bill.

30,000: Rough amount, in dollars, of the paycheck most lawmakers left Albany with after passing their spending plan, the quintessential example of taking the money and running.

A lot: In a moment of comical candor – or an honest admission that the whole process stinks and no one can really tell you what it all means – local veteran pol Dale Volker had the perfect answer to a colleague's question in the waning moments of the budget battles. “So this is the revenue bill for the state of New York,” mused Manhattan Democrat Liz Krueger. “How much revenue is in it?” Answered our local Republican senator, “Good lord. A lot.”

Too bad, yet again, it's not a pretty picture at all.

(Brian Ackley is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers (WIN) of Western New York. WIN is a consortium of 19 community weekly newspapers in Erie and Niagara counties with a combined paid

circulation of 75,000 homes, providing collaborative advertising and editorial support for member publications. For more information on WIN, or to provide feedback on this column, visit our website at www.wnynewspapers.com. Opinions expressed here are those of the author.)