With fewer than three weeks left in 2009 legislative session, Colorado lawmakers still have to balance the state budget for the next fiscal year, reach agreement on widely different versions of the School Finance Act and conclude such controversial issues as urban renewal reform and buying guns.

The Senate this week is taking another crack at the \$17.9 billion budget that no longer depends on Pinnacol Assurance funds to make up a \$300 deficit. Pinnacol's surplus was taken off the table after Gov. Bill Ritter announced an end to negotiations with the state's largest workmen's compensation insurance company.

The House last week instead took more money from cash funds, agreed to departmental cuts that includes furloughs for state employees, and passed companion budget reduction measures that included a two-year suspension of the senior and disabled veterans property tax exemption.

"We were already cut to the bone and now we're in amputation mode," said Rep. Lois Court, D-Denver, of the budget process.

The House is scheduled this week to debate a completely rewritten version of the SB 256, the annual bill that establishes funding for public schools.

The House Education Committee on Monday took out most of the reform provisions approved by the Senate that dealt with funding programs for at-risk students. The House version also removes new rules for enrollment averaging and size that many said would hurt rural school districts.

"Everything is in flux," said the committee's chairman, Rep. Michael Merryfield, D-Colorado Springs. "The bill that came out of the Senate is not the bill that will come out of the House."

All the differences between the House and Senate on both school finance and the budget package will have to be resolved before the legislature's mandatory adjournment on May 6.

The House spent most of its floor session Monday debating a new bill from Rep. Dickey Lee Hullinghorst, D-Longmont, to change the way Urban Renewal Authorities establish and finance new projects.

Hullinghorst wants to counties, school and special districts more involved in the process and to benefit more from enhanced sales tax revenue. Opponents say her bill will make it more difficult, if not impossible, to get bonding for new projects.

"This gives all taxing entities a seat at the table," Hullinghorst said. "There is a strong incentive for all to work together."

Under the bill, a URA would get all the revenue from the new project for the first five years, but then would have to share 50 percent of it with all the other taxing districts in the urban renewal area.

Rep. Jerry Sonnenberg, R-Sterling, who earlier in the session lost a bill that would have allowed fire protection districts to keep their portion of enhanced revenue from urban renewal, supported Hullinghorst's bill.

"The URAs have been effective," Sonnenberg said, "but now they take all the money that we voted on in special districts and say without a vote of the people we get to keep all that money and spend it however we want."

Other Republicans warned, however, that the bill would dry up bond financing for urban renewal projects.

"We keep hearing it doesn't affect bonding, but if after five years only 50 percent goes to tif (tax increment financing) you would not be able to do bonds," said Rep. Don Marostica, R-Loveland. "This bill is extremely dangerous."

The measure narrowly passed on a preliminary vote, with Rep. Kevin Priola, R-Henderson, supporting it and Rep. Cory Gardner, R-Yuma, voting against it. A final House vote is required before the measure goes to the Senate.

Debate also is expected to be contentious when the House considers Senate amendment to a bill removing the requirement for a second background check at gun shows for buyers who already hold a permit to carry a concealed weapons permit.

District 1 Sen. Greg Brophy, R-Wray, managed to get House Bill 1180 returned to a stronger version that looked more than the original, but not without an amendment that Brophy called "a poison pill." He said the amendment could drive a fiscal note that in tough budget times is the death knell of many a bill.

"Now my concern is that the people who are opposed to the Second Amendment will pull some shenanigan to detour this bill to appropriations where it probably will be killed," Brophy said.

Sen. Linda Newell, D-Littleton, succeeded in adding a requirement that the Colorado Bureau of Investigation develop a uniform concealed carry permit for use by all 64 county sheriffs in Colorado. Her amendment passed on an 18-17 vote.

"Instead of the sheriffs getting together and doing one statewide permit, the CBI would be doing it," she said.

The Senate debate over HB 1180 occurred just days before Monday's 10th anniversary of the Columbine High School shootings, in which two students killed 12 others and one teacher before taking their own lives.

Brophy's bill is another in a long series of legislative attempts to change Amendment 22, which voters passed in the wake of Columbine to require instant background checks at gun shows.

"The guns used by Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris had been purchased at gun shows without a background check," said Sen. Evie Hudak, D-Westminster. "This is a horrible way to commemorate the 10th anniversary by undoing Amendment 22."

Brophy refuted Hudak's argument.

"This honors the spirit of Amendment 22 completely," he said. "It allows you to forgo the insta-check if you've already been subjected to a much more thorough background check."

The bill originally was introduced into this year's legislature by Rep. Steve King, R-Grand Junction—with Brophy as the Senate sponsor—to eliminate the gun-show background check for gun buyers with concealed carry permits.

However, the House Judiciary Committee sent the full House a significantly weakened measure to require only that a person show proof of citizenship or being in the country legally before obtaining a permit.

The House passed the weakened version, 58-6, last Feb. 25.

"It didn't do anything the way it came out of the House," Brophy said.