Lawmakers still split on water as deadline nears

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By E.J. Schultz / Bee Capitol Bureau

SACRAMENTO — Negotiations on major water legislation continued Thursday night as lawmakers sought to overcome big differences before the session ends today at midnight.

Republicans and Democrats are trying to find consensus on bills to fundamentally change the way the state moves and manages its water supply while restoring the environmentally damaged Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

Democrats want to form a new council to oversee the delta. Republicans fear the council might add environmental hurdles to planning efforts now under way for a canal to move water around the delta southward.

In a last-minute flurry of closed-door negotiations, leading lawmakers Thursday sought a compromise that would appease groups that take water from the delta — such as Westlands Water District — and environmentalists, who want to safeguard the estuary.

“There’s always hope. Hope springs eternal,” said Sen. Dave Cogdill, R-Modesto, a leading water negotiator, as he headed into meetings.

He was less hopeful Wednesday night after the 14-member Assembly-Senate water conference committee released a plan that includes new rules for conservation and water-use reporting, as well as the council.

None of the panel’s six Republicans signed off on the plan, and Cogdill bashed it as one that “caters to the interests of extreme environmentalists.”

Assembly Member Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, a member of the conference committee, said the plan “lays out a pretty clear roadmap to create a more reliable water supply, but it also provides some assurances and some up-front process that are very important to the environmental community.”

Lawmakers are also trying to agree on how to pay for projects such as dams and canals. The GOP is seeking a $12.4 billion bond that would be paid off by the state’s general fund. Democrats prefer a combination of a bond and user fees.

Senate Leader Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, promised to include money in the plan before sending it to the floor for a vote. The “package represents crucial advancements in resource infrastructure for the state, but it is incomplete without a financing plan to go with it,” he said in a statement.