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Senate to vote on grim budget

Monday, May 18, 2009

The Massachusetts Senate will vote this week on an austere budget that cuts aid to cities and towns and abolishes 77 programs.

"Virtually every program is seeing a cut," said state Sen. Stan Rosenberg, D-Amherst. "It's going to affect the whole state. (Western Massachusetts) is not exempt, but we're not being picked on either."

In response to a projected $4.5 billion deficit, the Senate's $26.7 billion proposal is down $1.3 billion from the House plan, announced May 1. The tightened budget could encourage the Senate to pass an increase in the state sales tax from 5 to 6.25 percent, which the House passed on April 27.

"I think we have to raise revenues," said Rosenberg, who said he hopes the Senate comes to a decision on the state sales tax by tonight, when budget discussions begin.

Rosenberg sees no consensus among the senators on whether to raise the state sales tax. He said he will base his vote on what the majority of his constituents are telling him - and so far, while the response is not unanimous, most have told him, "don't cut my services."

"The only way to minimize cuts is to get more revenue in the picture," he said.

Human services on line

The areas being stretched most thin are local aid and human services, said Rosenberg. While education and health care will face reductions, both areas will receive support outside of the state's budget through federal stimulus funding, he said. Law enforcement, housing, transportation and recreation are also involved in the cuts.

In July 2008, local aid for the coming fiscal year's budget was originally set at $1.313 billion. That sum was cut by $128 million by Gov. Deval Patrick in January and then pared in the House's budget proposal to around $1.1 billion, before the Senate reduced the total to about $829.8 million - a $483 million, or 36.9 percent, reduction over 10 months.

Local aid would also be affected by a drop of $3 million in reimbursements to municipalities for land owned by the state.

In terms of human services, the Emergency Assistance Sheltering Program for Homeless Families would be allocated $82.6 million, which is more than $30 million below the $113 million the state expects to spend on the program this fiscal year.

Programs provided by the Department of Developmental Services would see a 30 percent cut from this year's expected funding. Employment services, emergency aid to the elderly, disabled and children, and support shelters for people at risk of domestic violence are among the other areas that would lose funding.

Commonwealth Care, a health insurance program for low- and moderate-income Bay State residents who do not have health insurance, would no longer insure those who are not U.S. citizens, including certain special status immigrants who are in the country legally.

The budget proposal may also eliminate non-emergency adult dental services and adult day habilitation services from the insurance coverage. Family health, school health, mental health substance abuse and smoking prevention services would each lose funding. Violence prevention programs, which received $9.3 million in fiscal year 2009, would be eliminated.

The Senate proposes increasing the state employee contribution for health insurance to 30 percent for every worker. Employees now pay between 10 to 20 percent, and the amount is lower based on the

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longer the employee has worked for the state.

Public safety, education cuts

Law enforcement officials would also see cuts. Four police-related line items totaling around $88 million would be eliminated, including the Quinn Bill program, which increases pay for officers who earn criminal-justice degrees. The proposed budget would also move the seven county sheriffs' budgets into the state budget, consolidate more than 150 line items that fund court system divisions into about 30 line items and add or increase fees such as filing for divorce, changing names and issuing temporary restraining orders.

Statewide, education would be cut by $79 million, or by decreasing each school district's aid by 2 percent. Special education reimbursements to school districts would decline by $124.9 million. However, the federal stimulus package offers $298.2 million in federal special education grants to school districts. The budget proposal aims to maintain the same level of funding as the prior fiscal year to higher education.

Additionally, the Registry of Motor Vehicles would be given more freedom to raise fees and partner with private entities to seek savings. And the Department of Agriculture would receive $8.5 million for the state's food banks under the proposed budget, which is $3.5 million below what the state will spend this fiscal year.

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