

Christie: NJ budget cuts need legislative approval

Wednesday, February 17, 2010

Associated Press

TRENTON — Less than a week after ordering a spending freeze to close a \$2.2 billion budget gap, Governor Christie acknowledged Wednesday that he cannot complete the midyear budget-balancing moves by executive order alone and needs approval from the Democratic Legislature.

The executive order by the new Republican governor freezing aid to schools, hospitals, colleges and transit surprised Democrats in the Legislature and endangered the bipartisan good will that characterized Christie's first three weeks in office.

Christie claimed in a televised speech last Thursday that he didn't need legislation to rebalance the budget. Afterward, Democratic leaders balked at being cut out of the process.

Christie maintained Wednesday that he has the power to stop \$1.6 billion in spending, but acknowledged for the first time that he would need legislation to move some of the money into the general fund to balance the budget.

The Republican told Millennium Radio 101.5 FM's Jim Gearhart that he doesn't have an agreement with the Democrats to move a bill. However, Christie said he's confident lawmakers will "do the responsible thing," or "come up with another idea that saves that kind of money."

Assemblyman Lou Greenwald, chairman of the Assembly Budget Committee, said the Legislature may not have to sign off if an alternative was reached. For example, some have suggested that the state use \$475 million of its \$500 million surplus rather than withhold \$475 million in aid to school districts.

Greenwald convened a hearing Wednesday to allow members of the public to air their concerns about the pending cuts.

"The decisions that he made with the stroke of a pen on Thursday can have dramatic impacts if you don't include the transparency we've strived for," said Greenwald. "You heard from people today who would have their funds cut for programs that impact the education of a child who was succeeding but who cannot see."

The daylong hearing included testimony from school administrators, health providers and others who decried the cuts.

School administrators said Christie's plan to withhold school aid will trigger local property tax increases. Hospital administrators said a \$12 million cut in charity care would result in an additional \$12 million loss in federal matching grants. And, 13-year-old Rocco Fiorentino of Voorhees spoke out on issues affecting the blind and visually impaired.

The Christie administration said it relied on an oral opinion from the Attorney General's office that the cuts could be accomplished by executive order. The AG's office referred questions to the governor's office, which did not return messages for comment Wednesday.

Gov. Jon Corzine proposed \$300 million in similar education cuts before leaving office, but the Democrat said his proposal needed approval from the Legislature. No bill was introduced before Corzine's term ended in January.

Greenwald said he wanted to examine the \$3.8 billion in funds from which cuts also could be made. He again urged the new administration to take advantage of the collective experience and wisdom of the legislative budget committees before making final adjustments to the current budget.

Besides balancing the current budget, Christie must introduce his spending proposal for fiscal year 2011 on March 16. The new budget year begins July 1.