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Residents speak out on Christie budget cuts

By: Dave Levinsky

TRENTON — New Jersey residents and officials got their first and possibly only chance to speak to state lawmakers about the expected effects of Gov. Chris Christie's midyear budget maneuvers.

A parade of parents, school officials and advocates for the disabled, hospitals and environment testified Wednesday before the Assembly Budget Committee about why some of Christie's proposed cuts should be blunted or averted.

Whether members of the Democratic-controlled state Legislature will be able to make substantive changes to Christie's plans remains to be seen.

The Republican governor unveiled his plan last week and stated that the cuts and freezes in scheduled school and hospital aid were needed to close a \$2.2 billion budget gap for the current fiscal year.

At the time, Christie said his plan would be accomplished by executive orders and did not require legislative approval.

On Wednesday morning, the governor backtracked slightly, telling Millennium Radio's Jim Gearhart that he has the power to stop spending but that legislative action is needed to move some of the savings into the state's general fund.

During the show on 101.5 FM, Christie said he is confident lawmakers would "do the responsible thing" or "come up with another idea that saves that kind of money."

Assembly Budget Committee Chairman Lou Greenwald, D-6th of Cherry Hill, opened Wednesday's hearing by saying the Legislature would use the public's input to hopefully find alternatives.

"With the governor's acknowledgment that he must work with the Legislature, we hopefully can at least now move forward in a bipartisan way to devise budget cuts that don't — as the governor's plan would do — place a heavy and undue burden onto our property taxpayers, commuters, and hardworking middle-class and poor residents."

During the hearing, lawmakers heard from a wide range of constituent groups.

Among the most moving testimony was from Rocco Fiorentino, a 13-year-old blind boy from Voorhees, who urged committee members to find an alternative to \$470,000 in proposed funding cuts for programs that provide equipment such as Braille books and recorded textbooks to visually impaired children.

"Not providing this equipment to the blind equates to (not) providing pen and paper and computers to the other students," Fiorentino said.

Parents and advocates for developmentally disabled residents said proposed cuts to programs that help members of that population move out of institutions into group homes or other residential settings would ultimately cost the state more money.

Republican lawmakers acknowledged that such cuts may be shortsighted, but they said the state's fiscal emergency demands that alternative reductions be found.

The Christie administration's action to withhold \$475 million in aid to the state's school districts was also addressed.

The move will cost Burlington County districts about \$37.4 million in aid this year, according to figures released by the governor's office.

Cherry Hill Business Administrator Jim Devereaux told the committee that the decision to cut aid based on available surplus and reserves would unfairly affect districts that planned and saved for difficult fiscal times.

Devereaux said the reduction in this year's aid would force Cherry Hill to use surplus earmarked for property tax relief. That loss, plus an expected 10 to 25 percent reduction in state aid for the upcoming 2010-11 school year, would likely require the district to lay off about 175 teachers and staff members.

"Our plan for dealing with (reduced state aid) has been blown up," he said.

Democratic lawmakers contend that forcing districts to use surplus will drive up property taxes. Some, like Greenwald, have proposed using a portion or all of an estimated \$500 million state surplus being saved for the next fiscal year.

Republican Assemblyman Joseph Malone, R-30th of Bordentown City, asked the Cherry Hill officials whether the district has tried to negotiate a pay freeze with its union. When pressed, Devereaux said district employees received about a 4.5 percent salary increase under the current school budget.

"I would hope there will be some meaningful discussion about limiting salary increases in order to limit the numbers of people that will need to be laid off," Malone said. "To me, that's the rational route to take."

Later, in a statement, Malone said both parties must accept responsibility for the state's fiscal problems.

"No one likes the immediate impacts of the governor's solutions, but we must all accept responsibility for the state's financial problems. Democrats did little to avert the state's dire situation when they controlled the budget for the past eight years. Now they do nothing but criticize the man who is cleaning up their mess," Malone said.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

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