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New Jerseyans comment on Christie's budget cuts

Assembly hears public express concerns over \$2.2 billion less in state aid

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A visually-impaired child, a school district administrator and a mental health advocate were among the many New Jerseyans who are appearing Wednesday before the Assembly Budget Committee which is seeking public input on Gov. Chris Christie's plan to close a \$2.2 billion deficit in the 2009-10 state budget.

Committee members began the hearing in Trenton buoyed by Christie's acknowledgement Wednesday morning that his proposed cuts or freezes in state spending do require legislative approval.

"... With the governor's acknowledgement 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 hard-working middle-class and the poor residents," said Assemblyman Louis Greenwald (D-Camden), the committee chairman, said as he began the hearing. "This also must be done in a transparent process that involves the open debate and discussion that the public deserves. Today's Assembly Budget Committee hearing will give the governor's plan the public debate it has lacked, and I look forward to more discussion in the weeks ahead."

Leaders of the Democratic-controlled Legislature were surprised and angered Thursday when Christie announced he had signed an executive order declaring the state government in a fiscal state of emergency, and action he saw as giving him and the state treasurer the power to make his funding solutions without input from lawmakers.

That led Democrats to call the hearing.

For the period through June 30, Christie, among other things, wants to cut \$445 million in aid to over 500 school districts that have budget surpluses, \$62 million to public colleges, \$32.7 million to NJ Transit, and \$12.6 million for charity care.

The hearing opened with moving comments made by Rocco Fiorentino, a 13-year-old visually-impaired middle school student from Voorhees who expressed concern that cuts in school aid would eliminate the equipment, textbook recordings and mobility training he needs to compete with sighted children in his class.

Fiorentino recently appeared on the TV program "Sesame Street" to discuss his impairment.

The boy asked legislators to imagine they were visually-impaired and suddenly lost the "textbooks on tape, needed to keep up with homework, the weekly mobility classes to learn how to travel safely and independently. All of a sudden that is cut from your daily lives. You can no longer keep up with your sighted peers.

"These budget cuts would directly effect every child who deals with visual challenge," Fiorentino said.

James Devereaux, the Cherry Hill School District business administrator, said his district would lose \$3.1 million in state aid, the amount that matches the money the school board set aside in the current budget to help prevent property tax hikes.

Devereaux said that to save the money, 63 educators and staff were laid off . He said if the cut is made, the state will have contributed 7.3 percent of a \$171 million budget.

"We understand and we emphasize with the magnitude of the state problem. We get it," Devereaux said. "We have been wondering when the big one would arrive. This is it. We know, we understand, we get it."

Devereaux said cutting aid to districts that attempt to save money will create a "use it or lose it mentality. No longer will districts be able to develop multi-year budgets to cushion taxpayers in the future."

Devereaux suggested using all or some of the \$500 million in the state so-called "Rainy Day" fund to reduce the deficit, reform education and contract negotiations to reduce costs or place a cap on how much state aid school districts must lose in tough fiscal times.

Tom Leach, a spokesman for the New Jersey Association of Mental Health Agencies, told the committee that the lost of the \$12.6 million in charity care would lead to the loss of \$12.6 million in matching federal aid.

Leach aid charity care, among other things, provides funding to treat 275,000 New Jerseyans with mental health problems and drug addictions. He said loss of the aid would lead to higher expenses in the care of the patients.

Prior to the hearing, Jeff Tittel, director of the Sierra Club of New Jersey, said, "Christie is seeking to balance the budget on the backs of the Clean Energy Fund and green jobs, at a time during a recession when those jobs are needed more than ever. His proposal to cut \$158 million from the Clean Energy Fund undermines the environment and the economy."

Tittel said, "We can eliminate paying people who sit on state boards or cut back on public subsidies for Xanadu. We could make AIG give us the \$150 million they owe us or go

after EnCap for the money it has cost the state's taxpayers. We're planning to spend a \$1.5 billion dollars to widen highways in the Pinelands, where there is no growth or traffic and \$2.2 billion to widen the turnpike. If we redesigned the turnpike project to include flex or reversible lanes, it would still do the same job but would cost hundreds of millions of dollars less. The ARC tunnel, which will cost the state \$9 billion, should be redesigned it so that it actually does what it is intended to do at a lower cost.

"We need to come up with ways to save money and balance budget but cutting mass transit and green jobs is penny wise and pound foolish. This is lose-lose-lose for the people of New Jersey. It will cost us jobs, hurt the economy, and add to pollution."

A long list of people testified as the hearing continued into early evening.

Assembly Republican Budget Officer Joe Malone (R-Burlington) said of the hearing, "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.

Assemblyman Declan O'Scanlon (R-Monmouth), a committee member, said, "Many voices were heard expressing how the freeze on state spending will impact organizations throughout the state. Legitimate concerns were detailed and we empathize with the plight of those affected. Sadly, we are in this fiscal predicament because previous governors and legislators did not heed the warning signs of impending revenue shortfalls.