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Lawmakers, governor battle over budget

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By JOHN FLOWERS

MIDDLEBURY — Local lawmakers on Monday served notice that they continue to try and reconcile their own fiscal year 2009 spending priorities with those prescribed by Gov. James Douglas.

Douglas in January unveiled his proposed fiscal year 2009 budget calling for spending and raising \$4.3 billion in state and federal funds. Lawmakers, during a legislative breakfast at the Bristol American Legion Hall, voiced concerns that the governor's budget includes some significant financial shortfalls in some areas.

"I think we know the budget we received is sort of a 'credit card budget,'" Rep. David Sharpe, D-Bristol, said of the Douglas's spending plan. "It shorts (state employee) retirement funds by \$8 million; it shorts the hospitals by \$8 million; it shorts the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board fund by \$5 million."

Sharpe, a member of the House Ways and Means Committee, said his panel has been struggling to find ways to shore up the programs he said have been shorted.

"How much of that can we restore? I don't know. But our committee has been asked to come up with \$5 million, and even coming up with that is going to be extraordinarily difficult," Sharpe said.

It will be difficult because lawmakers concede they aren't keen on raising taxes. Coincidentally, Vermont House Speaker Gaye Symington, D-Jericho, made a "no-new-taxes" pledge on Tuesday.

Lawmakers have, however, supported some proposed fee increases. Sen. Harold Giard, D-Addison County and Brandon, said he and other lawmakers endorsed a measure to increase revenues for the state's court system.

"We typically don't raise taxes during an election year for obvious reasons, so we are in a very tough spot," Sharpe said. "What's going to get cut? I can't answer that at this point. (The budget) is still in flux, and those decisions haven't been made."

Rep. Michael Fisher, D-Lincoln, said he's concerned about potential impacts on human services reflected in Douglas's proposed budget. Fisher, vice chairman of the House Human Services Committee, noted the state is \$18.5 million short of meeting its financial obligations for child care subsidies.

"There is a whole set of Vermonters that the law says we must support, but we don't," Fisher said of the program, which assists income-eligible families with child care tuitions. "I think we're ripe for a lawsuit."

Fisher also contended the state is "living in a bit of a fantasy around funding for the Vermont State Hospital to the tune of about \$8 million this year."

Rep. Christopher Bray, D-New Haven, said he is concerned about the tone of the budget debate as well as the numbers.

"As a Vermonter, I am a little disappointed with the way I have seen the budget process develop, particularly this year," Bray said. "So far, I think the process has been unnecessarily political and somewhat unproductive."

Bray recalled that when former Gov. Richard Snelling returned to office during the early 1990s, there was a serious budget crisis in Vermont. He said that while the late Republican governor did not see eye to eye on most issues with then-House Speaker Ralph Wright (a Democrat), Snelling made a point of sitting down with Wright to find common ground on a tight spending plan.

There is not the same spirit of cooperation between the executive and legislative branches this year, according to Bray.

"I haven't seen that sort of willingness of the administration to come over and engage the House," Bray said. "A budget came out, and now it's sort of political ping pong and I think we need people who are willing to make the trip across the hall and engage the Legislature if we are going to get things done."

Lawmakers noted that while Vermonters are not likely to see a tax increase, it seems equally unlikely they'll see a tax decrease.

Sharpe predicted that education funding reform is likely "stalled for this year, because of the number of school budgets that did pass and the relatively low level of noise around education funding this year."

Sharpe noted his committee has received a fair amount of feedback from affluent Vermonters who have voiced concerns that while they can afford rising school taxes, they are concerned their elderly neighbors on fixed incomes cannot. Sharpe argued that elderly and low-income residents are largely safeguarded by provisions of Act 68 that base one's education property tax bill on one's ability to pay.

Other discussion at Monday's breakfast focused on:

- Bill H.863, a bill that proposes to provide incentives to developers to establish more affordable housing in municipal growth centers. While the bill passed the House on Tuesday, local lawmakers voiced concerns about the potential of the new measure to increase permitting requirements in rural areas. They also questioned whether the \$200,000-plus homes permitted under the bill are actually "affordable" to Vermonters.

- Legislation, championed by Giard, that would, among other things, eliminate the position of commissioner of education and create the position of secretary of education to perform the commissioner's duties. The secretary would be appointed by the governor with the advice and consent of the senate and would sit on the governor's cabinet. The measure, S.371, would also eliminate the state board of education and transfer the primary duties of the current board to the newly created Vermont Agency of Education.

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