

courant.com/news/politics/hc-state-deficit-12-15.artdec15,0,5139554.story

Courant.com

FISCAL CRISIS

Democrats Unveil Budget Plan

By DANIELA ALTIMARI and ARIELLE LEVIN BECKER

December 15, 2009

HARTFORD —

Pledging to deal with the state's budget deficit before the holidays, House Democrats on Monday released a six-page manifesto that they say will help restore fiscal equilibrium.

Democrats have already rejected Republican Gov. M. Jodi Rell's deficit-reduction plan, saying it would sacrifice 5,000 jobs statewide and slash aid to municipalities.

The Democratic proposal relies on deferring \$100 million in contributions to the state employee retirement plan, delaying changes to the estate tax, and scouring for millions of dollars in federal funds and reimbursements, among other measures.



Rell had summoned lawmakers to a special legislative session scheduled for today to deal with a deficit that is projected as high as \$550 million for the current fiscal year.

But House Speaker Christopher Donovan said lawmakers won't vote on Rell's plan when they convene today. Instead, they will immediately adjourn, with the goal of returning "before the holidays." He also said the legislators, despite Rell's request, would not consider changes in the campaign finance-reform law today.

"We're not going to let Gov. Rell cost this state 5,000 jobs," Donovan, a Democrat from Meriden, wrote in the opening page of the Democratic budget plan. "We will save those jobs by addressing our deficit responsibly — with smart cuts and revenue changes, available federal dollars, municipal efficiencies and job growth."

Rell's spokesman, Rich Harris, wasted no time in critiquing the Democratic plan. He called it "laughable" and said it is based on made-up facts and numbers that do not add up.

"The claim of 5,000 job losses is a made-up number from so-called leaders who are unwilling and unable to address the realities of this fiscal crisis," Harris said. "The only job losses that should result

are those of majority party legislators who just don't get it — and just can't cut spending."

House Republican Leader Lawrence Cafero doesn't dispute that jobs may be lost, though he questioned the 5,000 figure.

"Something's got to give," he told reporters at a late afternoon press conference at the Capitol, held immediately after Democrats had their own press session. "Nobody wants to see anyone lose their job. ... We're trying to turn things around."

Earlier in the day, Democratic lawmakers and leaders of programs facing funding cuts held a press conference to protest \$47.2 million in reductions proposed by Rell that they said will hurt children. More than a dozen children sat in the audience.

State Rep. Toni Walker, co-chairwoman of the human services committee, noted that Rell's office characterized the cuts as targeted at government bureaucracy, not direct care. But Walker said the reductions would directly affect thousands of people at a time when many state residents are already going without work, health care or food.

Leaders of several programs described what losing state money could mean:

- A proposed \$3.9 million cut in day-care funding could lead to 600 children losing access to preschool and about 100 teachers losing their jobs, said Kathleen Queen, executive director of Wallingford Community Day Care Center.
- A proposed 25 percent cut in funding to school-based health clinics could lead to cuts in clinical services, forcing some students to seek medical care at already-crowded emergency rooms, rather than at their schools, said Jane Hylan, director of school-based health services for Community Health Center Inc.
- An \$88,000 cut in funding for the Boys & Girls Club of Meriden could mean cutting staff, reducing hours or eliminating programs, Executive Director Donald Maleto said.

Jeffrey Beckham, a spokesman for Rell's budget office, said cuts to health and human services programs with "very sympathetic constituencies" are inevitable when reducing the state budget because they represent a large part of the state's discretionary spending. Many parts of the budget, such as debt service, entitlement programs and pension obligations to retired state employees, cannot be cut.

Making cuts, Beckham said, requires identifying the most important government functions and trying to avoid cutting them. The programs that face cuts, he said, have merit.

"They're not being cut because they're bad programs," he said. "They're being cut because we're in a historic downturn and we have to make savings."

One solution pursued by the Democrats is more federal stimulus money. They assert that the state has not sought all the dollars it is entitled to.

Beckham said that's because the state is required to put up money first, which the federal government would then match. Not applying for that money means forgoing federal funding, he said, but it also saves the state from having to spend additional money to get the stimulus dollars. Beckham also

warned that stimulus money is not a lasting solution.

Copyright © 2009, [The Hartford Courant](#)