Medicaid cuts may be targeted

Media General News Service

RALEIGH — Legislative leaders say that Smart Start, Medicaid and a program to reduce kindergarten class size could be targeted for cuts as legislators try to slash $100 million from state spending plans and end a budget impasse that has lasted for more than a month.

House and Senate budget writers were told to identify the cuts in education, health and human services and other government programs by Thursday.

The cuts — which leaders say won't be as drastic as shutting state psychiatric hospitals, schools for the deaf or centers for the mentally retarded — won't be enough to shore up the proposed $14 billion spending plan and protect the state's coveted AAA bond rating, however.

Some Democrats say that tax increases must follow or deeper, more painful cuts are inevitable. "The $100 million won't get us where we need to go," said Rep. David Redwine, D-Brunswick, a co-chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. "This is just the beginning of the process. The beginning of the end, not the end of the end."

Senate Minority Leader Patrick Ballantine, R-New Hanover, dismissed the calls for additional cuts and tax hikes, saying that neither is needed.

"Once again they (Democrats) want to highlight emotional cuts to fuel support for tax increases," Ballantine said. "We feel we ought to live within our means.... All these dog-and-pony shows to say what we've got to cut is bogus."

Faced with the state's worst budget crisis in 16 years and a $167 million shortfall in the fiscal year that started July 1, the House Finance Committee backed a $440 million tax package that includes increases on sales, liquor, HMOs, luxury cars and income for wealthy families. It also includes tax breaks for married couples and parents. It does not have the support of the majority of the House, where Democrats hold a 62-58 margin, however.

Senate Democrats object to the income tax increase on couples that make more than $200,000 a year and instead support a 1-cent sales-tax increase expected to raise about $800 million.

Rep. Paul Luebke, D-Durham, said that the new spending targets should help legislators break the stalemate.

"It reduces the impasse because part of the debate with the Senate is how much money do we need," Luebke said. He said that the added cuts would also show that legislators responded to critics who charged that government should be scaled back before taxes are raised.

Legislative leaders asked members of the appropriations subcommittee on education to make do with at least $40 million less, bringing the total budget in the first year to $8.28 billion. Legislators would have to cut at least $39.5 million in health and human services to meet a proposed budget of $3.35 billion; $8million in justice and public-safety programs for a proposed budget of $1.5 billion; and $3million in natural and economic resources to meet a proposed budget of $295 million.

On Monday, Senate leader Marc Basnight, D-Dare, suggested that possible cuts include trimming Medicaid reimbursements to doctors; integrating Gov. Mike Easley's proposed preschool program with Smart Start, the early childhood development and education program; and making some cuts to Smart Start itself.

Sen. Walter Dalton, D-Rutherford, who is the chairman of the appropriations subcommittee on education, said that legislators are considering dropping a proposal to reduce kindergarten class size that the Senate estimated would cost $25 million in the first year. Because school is set to start soon, it would be difficult to implement the program this year, Dalton said.

After the cuts, which budget leaders expect to complete this week, legislators could consider raising taxes on telecommunications and satellite television, Redwine said.

The telecommunications tax, already approved by the Senate, would set a 6 percent tax on all in-state and out-of-state phone calls. It is expected to generate $88 million a year.

The other proposal would make sure that satellite television, currently exempt from state and local taxes, would be taxed at the same rate as cable television. The plan is expected to raise $30 million a year.

Ballantine and other Republicans insist that the state is not broke and have called for, among other things, consolidating the state's 47 worker-training programs to save $60 million, eliminating 25 percent of the administrators who work in the school's central offices to save $25 million and cutting 10percent, or $48.2 million, in donations to private groups.

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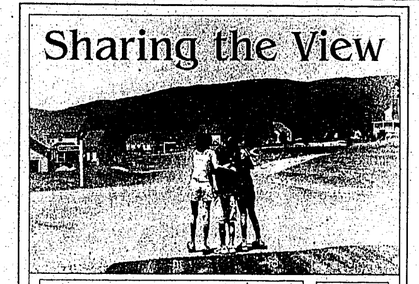

"Wow, do you see that?", exclaimed Anne. "No", answered Jake, "but look what I see, way over there!" "That's nothing", said Jane, "look here!"

As these youngsters stand in the road, sharing the same view, they also see it differently, each trying to direct the other to a separate focus. As our children attend religious training and worship each week, perhaps they need focus and direction concerning what they have been taught. What is their understanding...or misunderstanding?

An opportunity to discuss spiritual questions is also found at regular family devotions, for the answers to the questions our children have now will later give direction to their future. In Deut. 11:18-19, God directs, "Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds...teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road..."

Is your family sharing the spiritual view? Begin today.

Scriptures indicated by The American Bible Society

Sunday	Ephesians 6:1-24
Monday	I Thessalonians 1:1-10
Tuesday	I Thessalonians 4:1-12
Wednesday	I Thessalonians 4:13-5:11
Thursday	I Thessalonians 5:12-28
Friday	I Timothy 1:1-11
Saturday	I Timothy 1:12-20

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