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GOP leadership softens tone on budget proposal

Republicans are raising same concerns that Democrats have

By PEGGY FIKAC
AUSTIN BUREAU
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AUSTIN — As a vote looms on a bare-bones budget that would slash education and threaten nursing homes with closure, House GOP leaders softened their rhetoric on Tuesday to emphasize that it is a starting point and that cuts could be eased later without raising taxes.

"I think there's people out there that want to keep it right the way it is right now. But I think we're going to be able to do things that are better," said Jim Pitts, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee.

Pitts - who last week said the budget proposal approved by his committee might be as far as many House Republicans were willing to go - said after a closed-door House Republican Caucus meeting that GOP members raised many of the same concerns that have been aired by Democrats.

"There's a huge concern about what's going to happen in nursing homes," said Pitts, R-Waxahachie. "And what's close to all of us - we all have a public school in our district - is what's going to happen to our schools?"

Pitts said there also is concern about failing to pay for the growth in Medicaid caseloads. If lawmakers do not cover the state's share of the program - and they are an estimated \$6 billion short of doing so in the proposed budget - they would face the bill when they return in regular session in two years.

Pitts noted that a number of lawmakers have introduced measures that would yield revenue. His proposals include a bill to speed up tax collections, and he has said that a slight delay in state payments to school districts and others could make \$2.4 billion available in the coming two-year budget period.

Hoping for fiscal upturn

Others cited a proposal to ease state requirements on school districts to ease their expenses - a measure that has prompted concern about the prospect of burgeoning class sizes - and said they hope State Comptroller Susan Combs could revise her fiscal outlook for the next two years with a rosier view.

Pitts' committee last week kicked out a state budget proposal for the next two years that would carve \$23 billion in state and federal funds from current spending. It was a party-line vote, with Democrats voting against it.

Just a first draft

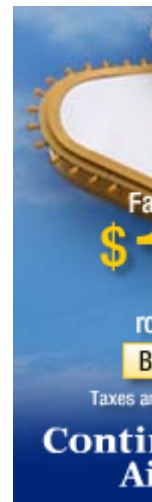
The measure, which is a response to a massive budget shortfall caused by the recession and past state budget decisions, is expected to be considered Friday by the full House.

In addition to shorting Medicaid caseloads, it would affect nursing homes and doctors by cutting Medicaid reimbursement rates. It would leave public schools short about \$8 billion of the amount they would get under current funding formulas.

GOP leaders said they expect approval of the bill in the House, where their party has a super-majority. That would send it to the Senate, which is working on a budget proposal to restore funding and searching for non-tax revenue. Differences would be worked out in negotiations.

"It is the beginning of the process," Speaker Joe Straus, R-San Antonio, said Tuesday. "I would say judge us by the budget we pass as a Legislature, not as a first, early-in-the-process budget proposal."

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Tough predicament

"If I were in their position, I would be nervous," Rep. Sylvester Turner, a Houston Democrat who is vice chairman of Appropriations, said of the Republicans.

"The budget that is before us on Friday is woefully inadequate," said Turner. "Who is going to leave this Capitol and say, 'I wanted smaller government, I wanted to reduce spending, and a part of that was to close nursing homes and put the elderly out of these nursing homes?'"

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