

Meetings aim to soften the budget blow

Governor appears sympathetic as he hears pleas to avoid recommended cuts

By Steve Terrell | The New Mexican

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Educators and state employees. People representing youth shelters, behavioral health organizations and literacy programs. Law-enforcement officers dealing with border crime. Emergency 911 operators.

These were just some of the New Mexicans who showed up at the Capitol on Tuesday to tell Gov. Bill Richardson that they want to be spared from looming state budget cuts.

More than 100 individuals had five-minute sessions with the governor, who, along with a handful of staff members, listened to their concerns and suggestions. About 40 groups were represented Tuesday, a spokeswoman for the governor said.

Richardson invited members of the public to meet with him while he considers budget cuts recommended in a bill sent to him by the state Legislature. House Bill 17, which would slice state spending by about \$153 million, kept education cuts below 2 percent but calls for axing more than 7 percent from some state agencies under the governor's control.

Richardson has the power to veto the bill or "line-item veto" parts of it. He has until Nov. 12 to act on the bill.

While Richardson was meeting with the citizens, his office released a statement from the Human Services Department that said proposed budget cuts would be "devastating." Among programs that would be slashed are children's health care, behavioral health care, health care for developmentally disabled individuals, medically fragile and those with HIV/AIDS and nutrition assistance for seniors.

"These services are critical for New Mexico's low-income residents," said Katie Falls, Human Services Department acting secretary. "Cuts to these programs can result in devastating consequences for New Mexico's most vulnerable population."

Arcie Baca, local leader of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, was part of a union delegation that met with Richardson on Tuesday. He said AFSCME asked him to veto the entire 7.6 percent budget cut. If signed into law that proposal would translate to a day of unpaid furlough for each state employee every two weeks, Baca said.

During several meetings attended by a reporter, Richardson appeared sympathetic to those pleading their cases.

"We'll see if we can isolate this program in the Department of Cultural Affairs," he told a delegation from the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy, who provide literacy programs and train literacy tutors for the state.

Richardson noted his wife, Barbara Richardson, is an advocate for literacy programs. But he warned the group that they probably face some kind of budget cut.

To Luna County Sheriff Raymond Cobos, who was speaking on behalf of a five-county law-enforcement coalition called the Safe Borders Initiative, Richardson said, "You've done a good with that program." Cobos said the program — which was set up by Richardson about four years ago in response to violence around the Mexican border — is in danger of losing \$250,000 if his budget is cut.

Cobos and two deputies who accompanied him said that while they were there to ask the border program not be cut, they were interested in saving other programs as well. The sheriff said he's a volunteer with the Coalition for Literacy in Deming. Lt. Allen Carter said that in Luna County, the sheriff's department operates the local domestic violence shelter. "We're big supporters of several programs," Carter said.

A group of six 911 operators from around the state asked to be spared from a cut in a separate bill passed by the Legislature last week. House Bill 3 took unspent money from several state funds to put in the general fund. This included \$3 million from a fund that pays for 911 electronic communication equipment. Jeanne Fortenberry, who directs the 911 center in Silver City, said that money was going to be used for a state-of-the-art system to allow dispatchers to receive text messages and streaming video from callers. The 911 fund would lose a federal grant of \$888,000, Fortenberry said.

Richardson told the group there's a possibility he'll line-item veto the \$3 million transfer.

Before the governor began his series of meetings, Robert Apodaca met with representatives from several state agencies with regard to Richardson's call for a freeze on stalled capital-outlay projects, in hopes of saving \$150 million. Saving money by scrapping inactive projects would prevent state worker layoffs and drastic program cuts, Apodaca said.

Still, he said, some agencies have been reluctant to part with their inactive projects. Last week, he said, some agencies showed him fresh hand-written contracts "on projects where no money's been spent since 2005."

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