



Budget cuts coming from Tallahassee to Northeast Florida

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By Matt Dixon

If you're a state lawmaker this year, more than likely the sound of people knocking on your door looking for state cash has not waned. It's one of Tallahassee's constant refrains.

It's also likely the number of times you've had to say "no" to money-seekers this year has skyrocketed.

With Florida having to fill a \$4 billion budget hole, state-funded organizations are watching their budgets shrink, and the situation is no different for those in Northeast Florida.

The process is in its early stages, or as Sen. John Thrasher, R-St. Augustine, put it during a Wednesday meeting of the Duval County legislative delegation: "We are in the third inning of a nine-inning game."

The finished House and Senate proposals will need to be refined and leaders from both chambers will then hold a pow-wow to iron out the differences. The Senate's \$69.8 billion proposal is about \$3 billion bigger than the House's, leaving most who are sniffing for money partial to Senate budget-writers.

"Doesn't anyone like our budget?" Rep. Lake Ray, R-Jacksonville, asked rhetorically at Wednesday's meeting. The comment drew chuckles from a host of representatives and lobbyists from Northeast Florida entities making their funding pitches.

The biggest loser under any scenario locally looks to be Shands Jacksonville hospital.

Under the Senate's proposal, the teaching hospital stands to lose \$61 million from the \$108.3 million in Medicaid funding it received in 2010. That's a drastic increase over the House budget that would remove \$9 million in Medicaid. The huge gap is because the Senate has proposed doing away with money for the medically needy, aged and disabled. Those cuts amount to \$48.2 million.

"We understand that the state is cutting its budget and that we have to participate in that, but we really think that hospitals are

facing disproportionate cuts," said Tony Carvalho, president of the Saftey Net Hospital Alliance of Florida.

In addition, the Senate's proposed budget sets aside \$30 million for Shands from the Low Income Pool, which provides funding for "underinsured and uninsured populations." That's \$40 million less than they got this year.

The House currently has no Low Income Pool money for Shands Jacksonville, but that is expected to change.

"I anticipate that the differences in the House and Senate budgets will be worked out," said Rep. Ron "Doc" Renuart, R-Ponte Vedra Beach, who is an osteopathic physician.

Florida State College at Jacksonville would also carry a lighter checkbook under both budget proposals, but could handle the cuts.

The House's proposal would shave \$8.7 million; the Senate's draft would cut \$2.2 million. FSCJ currently receives \$80.4 million in non-tuition state funding.

"If the final result is close to the Senate numbers, we can cover that with reserves," school President Steve Wallace said.

Wallace said he is grateful that both chambers are considering tuition hikes for the college system, which he says will help.

"In both cases we will achieve crisis status without a tuition increase," he said. "No one likes to increase tuition, but that is the key to maintain access."

There is a 5 percent tuition increase proposed in the House and an 8 percent hike in the Senate for the state college system.

UNF 'comfortable'

The University of North Florida's \$74 million pot of non-tuition state money is cut back by \$8 million in the House, and \$6 million in the Senate.

During Wednesday's delegation meeting, Janet Owen, UNF's vice president of government affairs, said because of the state's tough budget the school is comfortable with its budget numbers.

Its one request has nothing to do with additional budget allocations. The school needs state approval to transfer \$2.4 million saved by cutting back two other projects, to the construction of third and fourth floors of a new dining hall that will be used for academic and administrative space. Because it is state money, the school cannot transfer the funds without approval.

Language in the Senate's budget allows for the transfer. The House simply takes the money from UNF and puts it back into a trust fund held for higher education construction projects.

Owen said she is "optimistic" the House will alter its language.

Both the state-funded portions of State Attorney Angela Corey's \$24.3 million and Public Defender Matt Shirk's \$10.8 million budget would fare better than other Northeast Florida organizations under both proposals.

Under the House plan, Corey's budget would see a \$951,781 million boost, and in the Senate it would drop by \$398,471.

"Any possible increase would have to do with what is going on in other circuits. It would really be an adjustment," Corey said. "I have to tell you, we are just so thankful that we have sufficient resources to fight the crime we deal with in Northeast Florida."

Money for state attorney's offices is doled out based on a formula that takes into account things like caseload.

Shirk's budget has \$10.6 million from the state in both the House and Senate's proposals.

"Whatever the state does with our budget, we will make it work," he said.

The Duval County Public Health Department is estimating a roughly \$2.5 million cut from the \$12 million it received last year. The biggest cut: Zeroing out the \$841,995 budgeted this past year for an AIDS prevention and surveillance project. They got \$12 million in state funds during the current fiscal year.

"We don't really know yet what's going to happen. What we are trying to do is use what the Legislature has proposed and use that as a planning starting point."

It is not possible to tell where the House and Senate proposals fund the department because they just list a large allocation for county health departments. The number in both the House and Senate is \$1 billion.

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