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Arizona lawmakers gear up for session

Budget tops list of everyone at the Capitol

By Daniel Scarpinato

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

PHOENIX — If you want a word to sum up this year's legislative session, try this one: money.

And it's the lack of money that has lawmakers and Gov. Janet Napolitano particularly at odds.

An estimated \$970 million hole in this year's budget — and a projected \$1.7 billion shortfall next year — have prompted a debate over how the state should manage its way out and whether new initiatives should be up for consideration.

Both parties want things that will cost money. Republicans are pushing to repeal permanently the state property tax, and Democrats are defending social-service programs for children and the elderly.

House Speaker Jim Weiers, R-Phoenix, calls the shortfall an "opportunity" to curb spending and set priorities.

But Democrats say with spending already tight, the balancing would fall on the backs of the needy.

"We may be talking about a budget, but we're also talking about a society, and Americans don't like to see our elderly, our poor and disabled going without food or our children going without medical treatment," said Sen. Marsha Arzberger, D-Willcox, Senate minority leader.

Meanwhile, discussions of new programs — anything that will cost a dime — are taking a back seat for now.

"The budget becomes the 800-pound gorilla in the room," said Rep. Steve Gallardo, D-Phoenix, House minority whip.

And all this in an election year.

Taxes

Rising residential property values have prompted Republican lawmakers to push for property tax cuts on both the local and state levels.

A statewide tax levy was suspended in 2006 and is set to come back into effect in the 2009-10 budget year — which Republicans say amounts to a tax increase.

Napolitano, on the other hand, says that because of the state deficit —

By the numbers

- 30
- Senate seats
- 60
- House seats
- 691*
- Number of lobbyists
- 29
- Women in the Legislature
- 60**
- Men in the Legislature
- 244
- Number of bills introduced as of Friday

* Lobbyist registrations filed in 2007

** One House seat is vacant

Odds and ends

Bills of mention that may or may not see the light of day:

- SB 1010: Creates a cell phone users' bill of rights, which would allow users to cancel a contract without being penalized. Sponsor: Sen. Jim Waring, R-Phoenix
- HB 2002: Forbids workplace discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender

the effects of which are not yet fully known — extending the tax cuts now is premature.

"That issue is untimely," she said last week, "and quite frankly, given the amount of the deficit, . . . to me it's irresponsible at this point in time."

Meanwhile, Rep. Marian McClure, R-Tucson, has a plan to address local property taxes. She says that with assessed valuations soaring, homeowners are struggling to pay their taxes.

Her legislation would restrict the increase for tax purposes to 3 percent yearly.

Immigration

An annual issue for the Legislature, this year's immigration debate will take place with the background of Arizona's new employee-sanctions law going into effect.

Rep. Russell Pearce, R-Mesa, the architect of that law, has already unveiled a series of bills to toughen laws against illegal immigrants.

Pearce wants to require proof of legal presence in the United States to register a vehicle or to get a title and to deny workers' compensation benefits to undocumented workers injured on the job.

But Pearce, who has been successful with previous legislation, may face legal and political challenges with other measures, fellow Republicans say.

One bill, for example, would deny regular birth certificates to babies born in Arizona unless at least one parent proves citizenship — a tough issue for Republicans running this year in vulnerable districts.

Child Protective Services

Three high-profile deaths in Tucson last year of children who were being monitored by Child Protective Services may prompt legislators to make policy changes.

State Rep. Jonathan Paton, R-Tucson, wants to make CPS records public automatically when children have died. If a county attorney thinks doing so will jeopardize a case, the burden would be on the prosecutor to make the case in court to keep the documents private.

That and other moves — such as making CPS employee records and dependency hearings public — are likely to provoke disagreement.

Health care

Although lawmakers and Napolitano clashed last year over covering more children through the state's health-care system, this year the big health-care issue is likely to be figuring out how to insure small-business owners and the self-employed.

A debate over how to fix or reform the financially strapped Healthcare Group of Arizona, which covers 25,000 self-employed Arizonans, just barely began to percolate last year.

Lawmakers already are drawing battle lines. Some see Healthcare Group's \$23 million deficit as a sign that the program needs a major overhaul, but others say the program must be preserved as is through tweaks and subsidies.

Expect Republicans to push for a risk pool, which Democrats say may increase access but won't address costs for small-business owners.

Education

identity or expression. Sponsor: Rep. Tom Prezelski, D-Tucson

- HB 2137: Bans gifts from lobbyists. Sponsor: Rep. Ed Ableser, D-Tempe

- HB 2021: Extends the time that changes can be made to the state's controversial 9/11 memorial. Sponsor: Rep. Jonathan Paton, R-Tucson

- HB 2010: Caps the number of bills a lawmaker can introduce at 10 per year. Sponsor: Rep. Chad Campbell, D-Phoenix

- HB 2096: Creates a voucher program for children who attend private school. Sponsor: Rep. Andy Biggs, R-Gilbert

A key element of the state's plan to get out of the financial hole will revolve around how to pay for schools.

Napolitano and fellow Democrats say financing school construction makes sense and could save the state \$214 million. But Republicans call that a "gimmick" that will end up costing Arizonans for decades.

State Senate President Tim Bee, R-Tucson, says the issue will likely result in some compromise.

"Instead of just saying 'black, white,' maybe there's something in the middle or something new," Bee said.

A Republican plan introduced early this month would halt construction of new schools for a year — a \$42 million saving.

Higher education also may face cuts. The Republican proposal called for a 10 percent across-the-board cut in money for state universities.

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the players

Janet Napolitano

Governor

Democrat

In office since: 2003

Personal: 50, former Arizona attorney general and U.S. attorney

On how the budget shortfall will affect her agenda: "We can still move forward — we may have to do things more slowly than I would have wished."

Tim Bee

Senate president

Republican, Tucson

In office since: 2001

Personal: 38, partner in bus company

On the looming budget negotiations: "It's my job as Senate president to facilitate the negotiations and conversations that will bring us to the ultimate solution."

Jim Weiers

Speaker of the House

Republican, Phoenix

In office since: 1995

Personal: 54, owns small loan business

On the potential to slim the size of government: "This year is no different from any other — rather than challenges, we have opportunities."

Phil Lopes

House minority leader

Democrat, Tucson

In office since: 2003

Personal: 66, lawmaker

Economic turnaround: "People keep coming to this state. Soon they will soak up the housing that we now see as a glut. . . . Revenue will rebound, as it always has."

Marsha Arzberger

Senate minority leader

Democrat, Willcox

In office since: 2000

Personal: 69, farmer and rancher

On preserving aid to needy Arizonans: "We may be talking about a budget, but we're also talking about a society, and Americans don't like to see our elderly, our poor and disabled going without food, or our children going without medical treatment."

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