

Patrick to end nearly 1,000 jobs

Cuts would hit all of government; reduction plan spares local aid

By [Matt Viser](#)

Globe Staff / October 30, 2009

WORCESTER - Governor Deval Patrick intends to close a projected \$600 million budget gap by eliminating nearly 1,000 state jobs, shaving millions from human service programs, reducing help for local school building projects, and possibly closing the State House library, the governor and his aides said yesterday.

Patrick said he would move to make \$352 million in cuts across state government, including \$277 million from the executive branch. He will also seek authority from lawmakers to make \$75 million in additional reductions in other branches of government, including the Legislature, the judiciary, and county sheriffs.

But Patrick's budget cuts - which were met with a mixture of frustration, resignation, and even relief that they were not worse - were notable for what they did not touch: local aid, the money cities and towns rely on to run their schools, police, fire departments, and much more. Patrick made a point of saying he would fully protect that funding.

"We will not cut our record investment in our students and our schools. We will not shortchange our children's future," he said, in an address to the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce. "Local communities are the front line of both our economic and our social life, and they are struggling as it is."

The rest of the \$600 million gap Patrick said he would close through \$248 million in additional measures, including \$62 million from the federal stimulus bill, which will offset cuts to higher education. In addition, the state plans to send \$27 million less to the School Building Authority, which helps communities fund school building construction.

Patrick also said he would ask the Legislature to eliminate two controversial paid holidays for certain state workers, Evacuation Day and Bunker Hill Day, although that change would carry more symbolic weight than financial implications.

It is the fourth time in the past year that Patrick has been forced to make emergency cuts because tax revenues came in lower than expected. Tax receipts for the first quarter of this fiscal year missed projections by \$212 million.

State revenues have yet to stabilize, and fiscal watchdogs warn that more cuts are probable, perhaps even later this fiscal year.

"There may have to be another round of cuts this year, and there certainly will be major cuts in the fiscal 2011 budget," said Michael J. Widmer, executive director of the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation.

One issue with Patrick's approach to budget-balancing, Widmer said, is it relies in part on one-time revenue sources, including federal stimulus funds and money from the state's reserve account.

That means that next year, if that money is not available again, the state will be forced to cut further.

"It just delays the day of reckoning," Widmer said.

Following Patrick's directive yesterday, various departments will immediately begin crafting plans and determining how to reduce the number of state jobs by nearly 1,000 positions, which will come through a mixture of layoffs, retirements, and eliminating vacant positions.

Jay Gonzalez, Patrick's budget chief, said another 1,000 state jobs are in jeopardy if state employee unions do not agree to \$35 million in concessions. He said the state hopes to get an agreement by Dec. 1.

Those savings could be achieved in part through unpaid furlough days; state managers, under Patrick's cuts, will take nine unpaid furlough days.

Other money-saving measures include a \$5 million cut to the Quinn Bill, an education incentive program that has boosted the salaries of police officers.

The program has already seen a huge cut in this year's budget.

Although primary sources of local aid were spared, Patrick did eliminate tens of millions of dollars that directly affect cities and towns, including \$18 million to help regional school districts run school buses and \$5.2 million in charter school reimbursements.

"The overall sense is that people were expecting a cut, and a cut came," said Geoffrey Beckwith, executive director of the Massachusetts Municipal Association. "But it was smaller in magnitude than they had feared."

Patrick has broad discretion to make emergency cuts to balance the budget. But part of his plan remains up in the air, because he needs the Legislature to both grant him expanded budget-cutting powers and not override any of his proposals.

A leading House lawmaker, state Representative Charles A. Murphy, chairman of the House Committee on Ways and Means, suggested that the Legislature might not agree with Patrick's approach in every area.

"The governor has given us some suggestions," said Murphy, a Burlington Democrat. "There are many ways to skin this cat, so to speak. We may look at other ways to get this done. We recognize the governor has a difficult job in this, but that's not necessarily the end-all."

Beyond the State House, Patrick's cuts received a mixed reaction.

Advocates for the disabled applauded smaller cuts than they feared to human services, and they even came to Worcester to show their support. Cuts to human services ended up being \$82 million, he said, and advocates had expected as much as \$300 million.

"We're psyched," said Leo Sarkissian, executive director of The Arc, which advocates for 180,000 individuals and families with intellectual and developmental disabilities. "No one likes a cut, but this is good. Families and advocates are thrilled."

But Deborah Banda, the state director of AARP Massachusetts, criticized a cut in a prescription drug program for seniors.

"We question both the wisdom and the compassion of the \$5.6 million cut to Prescription Advantage, the state's pharmacy assistance program for seniors," she said, calling the program "a lifeline for thousands of seniors who are struggling to afford their medications."

Shannon Grants, which help fund youth violence prevention programs, also saw a significant cut, on top of other cuts over the past few months. The program was funded at \$13 million last year and was cut in half for this year. Patrick sliced another \$2 million yesterday, bringing the program's funding to \$4.5 million.

Homelessness advocates said they felt their programs were singled out. Joe Finn, president and executive director of the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance, sent an e-mail to supporters calling the 7.4 percent cut to homeless assistance “both unconscionable and bad policy.”

“This is going to force people onto the street,” said Lyndia Downie, president and executive director of the Pine Street Inn.

She said her shelter, which has a \$34 million budget, will now lose \$1.7 million in state funding. The shelter is still working on how to deal with the cut, she said, pointing out that it comes as the weather is getting colder and as the demand for shelter will increase.

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