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Buckley warns against 'wrong approach' to budget cuts

BY VALERIE MILLER

Nevada's budget cuts must be in the right places. That was the stance of Nevada Assembly Speaker Barbara Buckley as she spoke to a group of Southern Nevada business people.

"Some suggest the approach is cut, cut, cut. Let's cut health and human services, let's cut public safety, let's tighten the belt. I think that is the wrong approach," she said before a roundtable discussion attended by about 30 business leaders at the North Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce.

The forum, held Jan. 14, was the latest in a series of statewide roundtables held by Buckley to get public input in how to fix a projected state budget deficit of some \$1.6 billion.

Buckley said she was concerned that revenues for 2009-2011 were expected to be down some 34 percent from the previous biennium, with more than 90 percent of the state's budget made up of funding for education, Health and Human Services and public safety. Those departments are already running at a reduced size, she said.



"We have very few optional services under Medicaid, less than other states. If you cut education, Health and Human Services, and public safety by that amount, you have a recipe for disaster."

Public safety staff was down 20 percent because of unfilled positions, from law enforcement to corrections. Any further cuts in corrections could signal prison closures, the assemblywoman said, which could mean more criminals on the streets. Health and Human Services is seeing demand for services triple as a result of massive job losses in the state.

"While the average is 200 people a day, they are now at 600," Buckley said. She did suggest examining, and possibly eliminating, some of the incentives and tax giveaways the state offers to entice businesses to come to Nevada, citing abuses of the program.

"We have a business in Northern Nevada that is moving three blocks and getting STAR bonds and all other sorts of things," she said. The STAR, or

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Sales Tax Anticipated Revenue, bonds allow approved projects to be funded through bonds based on the amount of sales tax they are expected to be rebated by the state and local governments. As an alternative proposal, the lawmaker suggested "targeting" a certain area for incentives, such as renewable energy.

Education was at the forefront of the chamber discussion. Buckley said it needs to be made a priority She pointed to Gov. Jim Gibbon's proposal for a 6 percent pay cut, but also noted that Nevada teachers make less than the national average as it is. "Do we really want to cut teachers' salaries when we already pay them 7 percent less?"

Buckley's stance to protect educational funding seemed to have a lot of support from the crowd.

"We need to have a base here for education, because if you are going to diversify or bring green energy, we need people who can read and do math. The fact that we are 49th (in the nation) is appalling," said John McMillan, an attorney with the Flangas McMillan Law Group and a North Las Vegas chamber board member.

Business owner Peggy Smith noted her sister is a teacher and a single parent struggling to make ends meet. Now, any further cuts would undermine her efforts to acquire a masters degree and better her life.

"She is facing a 6 percent pay cut ... and she is trying to make money to keep her house."

John Wilson, the general manager of MedicWest Ambulance and a North Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce board member who served as a moderator of sorts, noted the state's current projected 30-plus percent budget shortfall doesn't account for future deficits. He quizzed Buckley on her stance on the dilemma over the Public Employee Retirement System, or PERS, and PEB -- Public Employee Benefit, which also extend into retirement.

Lawmakers are examining the issue, she responded, but Buckley said she would not support taking away health benefits for current retirees already in the system. The legislator gave the example of a former state worker who might be dependent on those benefits for cancer treatment.

"That's wrong. You can't change the rules in the middle of the game," she said.

One more roundtable is planned for Southern Nevada before the Nevada Legislature convenes next month for its 2009 session, she said. The date and location have yet to be determined.

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