

# Spokesman Review, *April 7, 2005*

## House budget spends more on schools: Legislators have two weeks to work out disparities

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OLYMPIA - As protesters picketed outside the Capitol on Wednesday chanting "Cheap! Cheap! Cheap!" the state House of Representatives proposed a budget that taps the same "sin taxes" as last week's Senate proposal but includes more spending on education.

Both budgets would boost cigarette taxes 60 cents a pack this year. Both would partially reinstate the state's estate tax. Both would boost liquor taxes and tack a sales tax onto extended warranties.

The House budget puts more money into K-12 schools and higher education; the Senate steers more to mental health programs.

Those differences will be ironed out over the next two weeks, as the House and Senate fine-tune a two-year general-fund budget that will total about \$26 billion. The legislative session is slated to end April 24.

House budget writers Wednesday said their budget is a modest blend of cuts, new taxes and savings.

The priorities were simple, said House budget Chairwoman Rep. Helen Sommers: "Education, education, kids, health."

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On education: Both the House and the Senate proposals include \$139 million in cost-of-living increases for teachers and \$138 million to help shrink class sizes.

Both budgets would boost tuition 5 percent a year at community colleges, 6 percent at Eastern Washington University and similar-sized schools, and 7 percent at Washington State University and the University of Washington. Enrollments would increase by 10,000 slots under the House budget. Most of those additional students would be at community colleges.

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On health: Both budgets maintain enrollment in the Basic Health Plan - the state's subsidized health coverage for the working poor - at 100,000 people. The House plan spends slightly less on community mental health coverage cuts by the federal government. Both budgets, however, would make Medicaid recipients pay a new \$3 fee per prescription.

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On children: The House budget would increase the state's child-care subsidy for low-income families and restore health coverage for 8,800 poor illegal-immigrant children.

All the budgets proposed this year include new taxes. Gov. Christine Gregoire called for \$202 million in additional taxes, the Senate called for \$431 million, and the House settled at \$384 million. Some of the proposals floated early in the session - chopping outdated tax breaks, say, or putting a new nickel-a-can tax on beer and soda pop - fell away over the past three months.

"I think that this budget and revenue package reflects a fair amount of restraint," said Rep. Jim McIntire, D-Seattle.

Still, many Republicans were unhappy.

"The thing that's most frustrating to me is that this is a strictly Democratic budget," said Rep. David Buri, R-Colfax, the region's sole lawmaker on the large House Appropriations Committee. He said that Democrats - who hold a majority in the House - largely shut out House Republicans.

Also unhappy were some advocates for the poor. They urged budget writers not to cut back on a state program that issues \$300 monthly checks to unemployable people and not to cut the \$7 million "readiness to learn" program that helps impoverished students.

"No more cuts!" a small group of protesters chanted outside the House office building Wednesday.

On the other side of the issue was the Evergreen Freedom Foundation, a conservative group that called all the budgets too extravagant.

"With this spending-limits-busting budget, Democrats have now gone 0-3 in drafting sustainable and fiscally responsible budgets," said budget analyst Jason Mercier.