Cuts target education, services

Summary of proposed state budget details plans to close deficit

BY KATHIE DURRIN
Columbian staff writer

State budget writers late Thursday released the first details of a two-year state budget that has been under development — and under wraps — for weeks.

The grim page and a half summary reveals that education, health programs and human services will share deep spending cuts under a plan to spend $31.4 billion between July 2009 and June 2011.

As expected, nearly $800 million will be cut from K-12 education, in part by suspending a voter-approved initiative that guarantees cost-of-living raises for teachers and slashing $600 million from another initiative that supports reduced class size in K-12 schools.

More than 4,000 slots for college students will be eliminated, and unemployment at four-year schools will increase by 14 percent for each of the next two years.

Some 80,000 people will lose coverage under the state Basic Health Plan, but the budget preserves partial funding for the General Assistance-Unemployable program, which gives cash and medical care to disabled people who can't work and protects the Adult Day Health program, which provides day programs for the elderly and disabled.

All state parks will remain open, and no juvenile detention center will be shuttered.

The budget leaves $300 million in reserves in recognition that "things are still tough out there," said Democratic Rep. Carol Ammons of Bellingham.

Legislature

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Reprieve for a reservoir

The long-awaited removal of the Condit Dam will have to wait some more.

Clark County

Career fair attracts hundreds

Becky Barrett, along with hundreds of others, talks with potential employers during Career Information and Job Fair at the Hilton Vancouver in downtown Vancouver on Thursday morning.

Anxious job seekers meet employers, attend workshops

By CAMILJOINE
Columbian staff writer

Vince Pick of Vancouver left his engineering job at Hewlett-Packard four years ago and went into real estate sales.

When home sales slowed to a trickle, Pick let his real estate license lapse and enrolled in a Clark College engineering program to freshen up his skills.

He has spent more than a year looking for work in the field, and Pick said he realizes his job prospects are slim.

"There's an awful lot of competition," said Pick, who was one among a sea of 700 job seekers who showed up at a Thursday morning job fair in downtown Vancouver.

The event came at a time of near record unemployment in Clark County, as employers across the board have cut operations costs and reduced staff. In March, the jobless rate climbed to 12.5 percent with an estimated 27,400 county residents unemployed and looking for work.

That's up from 9.3 percent in March 2008.

Catherine Keane talks to a large group of people waiting for the doors to open at the job fair Thursday morning.

The apparent failure of the sales tax plan came after advocates mounted a last-ditch push for support. Leaders of two Service Employees International Union chapters pledged with legislative leaders in a letter, and advocates of a program called Adult Day Health Health repeated warnings that the expected deep budget cuts to health care could push some sick people toward death.

Meanwhile, a Senate Demo
Job fair:

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"Some of them are conducting on-the-spot interviews, some are hiring immediately and others are filling their applicant pool," she said.

Pick said his intent was to stand out among the sea of job hopefuls.

"The bottom line is, it's a company market right now," said Pick, who took a voluntary severance package from HP in 2005. At least half of the staff in his department were getting laid off.

He sold real estate until it became cost prohibitive to maintain his professional license.

"The fees involved were more than I made," said Pick, 50. He planned to play up his experience and background of a 20-year engineering career to compete for jobs in his field.

"But there is an awful lot of competition," he said.

Pick was not alone in the swarm of job seekers trying to get a foot in the door.

For example, Christine Israel, 27, of Vancouver said she was interested in training for a new health care job, perhaps as a nursing assistant or registered nurse.

"I'm really open to whatever doors open to me. I'm just hoping one opens soon," said Israel, formerly self-employed as a massage therapist and reflexologist.

She was seeing between 10 and 25 clients a week. Her massage customers gradually declined as the economy worsened with a national financial crisis, slowing retail sales and mounting job losses.

Israel said she feels lucky that she can seek training while supported by her husband, Matthew Israel, a full-time truck driver.

She would also like to find a full- or part-time job.

"The hard thing is, I know I'm not the only one out there looking for work," Israel said.

"The bottom line is, it's a company market right now."

Verne Pick
UNEMPLOYED FORMER HEWLETT-PACKARD ENGINEER

The large pool of job seekers has benefits for employers, said Kris Greene, who manages two Vancouver offices for Country Financial.

Greene was at the job fair to recruit candidates for five open positions.

"We need representatives to market our products and financial services," said Greene. He added that only self-motivated individuals need apply.

His company is in perpetual hiring mode, said Greene, who interviews about 250 people a year.

Greene also sees drawbacks to the high number of local job hopefuls.

"We have to sift through a lot more resumes to find a candidate who will fit," he said. "But we are seeing more qualified people," he said.

For applicants, getting noticed can come down to a polished resume and a good three-minute elevator speech, said Keane, the Clark College career specialist.

"Job seekers should be able to say in three minutes or less what they're interested in, their qualifications and what makes them exceptional," she said.

The speech requires feedback and practice sessions, which were built into Thursday's job fair with mock interviews and workshops with real employers.

The sessions allowed participants to get feedback from people in the industry, critical in today's job market, Keane said.

"It's more crucial than ever to be polished at this time, especially when the economy is down," she said.

Perhaps Battle Ground resident Michael McGary got the message beforehand. McGary, 53, showed up at the job fair in pressed shirt and tie, a folder of printed resumes tucked under his arm.

It's been less than a month since he lost his job as general manager of a Portland restaurant that was shuttered on March 31.

McGary said he would be happy to find a similar job, but he's being realistic.

"It's not a good market to be looking for such jobs. The entire industry has been hit," he said.

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