Gregoire on the Budget

In quest of a new approach

Gov. Chris Gregoire, at top, warned a crowd of 400 at Clark College on Tuesday that state government must be permanently transformed to meet the reality of lagging revenue and increased demand for services. She was in Vancouver to hear creative ideas about how the state can do more with less.

GOVERNOR ASKS PUBLIC TO HELP COMPLETELY RESHAPe STATE SERVICES, SPENDING

By LADY DURBIN

Gov. Chris Gregoire came to Clark County on Tuesday to ask for help making permanent changes in the services that Washington’s financially strapped state government will provide in the future.

But at a public meeting at Clark College, attended by about 400 people, most speakers advocated for preserving state funding, whether for higher education, welfare-to-work programs, school levy equalization or environmental protection.

Gregoire said state government will face an additional $3 billion deficit in the 2012-13 budget cycle and a projected $9 billion deficit in 2013-14, driven in part by increased demand for state-subsidized health care, unemployment insurance payments and other social services.

“The coming budget crisis is a new challenge for us, a different challenge,” Gregoire said. “This is not just about getting through a crisis. This is about transforming state government to meet the needs of a new economy.”

Audit: Pentagon cannot account for $8.7B in Iraqi funds

By TAREK EL TABLAWY

WASHINGTON -- A new audit has found that the Defense Department has no idea how much money it spent in IRAQ and cannot account for $8.7 billion of the funds.

Police, activists prepare for Arizona protest

By JONATHAN A. COOPER and MICHELLE PRICE

PHOENIX — The sheriff of Arizona’s most populous county is making room in a vast outdoor jail and determined to round up illegal immigrants to fill it. Police from the U.S.-Mexico border to Grand Canyon are getting last-minute training. And protests and marches are planned throughout the state.
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To that end, she has appointed a bipartisan commission of Washington citizens to advise her and is holding hearings around the state. She has also directed all state agencies to ask themselves a series of probing questions: Is the activity an essential service? Do state government have to provide it? Does it have to be paid for with the state general fund, or can user fees be charged? Is there a more efficient way to provide it?

Some who spoke at Gaiser Hall held and plan for their own struggles to survive the economic downturn that has forced the state to find $12 billion to balance its budget in the past two years.

"The champion cause I am championing tonight is my wallet," said John Ley of Vancouver. "I am sorry, but I cannot afford any more government help.

Ley said he took a 40 percent cut in pay and lost his defined-benefit pension in the recession. The new economy does not provide defined pension benefits," he said. "It provides for defined contribution plans.

Members of several nonprofit groups urged the state to consider more public-private partnerships to maintain services for the most vulnerable, including children, the frail elderly, the homeless, and families in distress.

"I am very concerned about any cuts to human services," said Debra Adams, who directs the YWCA's Safe Choice domestic violence program. But she said she's willing to work with the state to make its money go further.

"I work for a nonprofit," she said. "You give us two pennies and we're going to rub them together and make a nickel.

Ron Wilson, a former teacher who now works as an investor, questioned the generous salaries and benefits many state workers receive. "A prudent thing for the state to do is to cut wages and not raise taxes," he said to loud applause.

Several speakers urged Gaigne to end the annual $5 million tax break enjoyed by the Canadian-owned TransAlta coal plant in Centralia.

Evergreen Public Schools Superintendent John Deeder, the first to speak, urged the governor, "Don't reduce levy equalization to school districts that lack valuable industrial property to boost their tax bases.

"We understand we're going to take some cuts," Deeder said. "But we'd rather reduce the school year than give up levy equalization, which provides $483 for every student who attends school in his suburban district.

Rick Marshall said it's time to "rethink our prison system." The state incarcerates too many nonviolent prisoners for too long, instead of using extended work releases and community supervision, he added.

But Judy Bradley, a Department of Corrections employee, said the state made a costly mistake when it cut community supervision for thousands of released offenders last year. As a result, she said, the community has seen a dramatic increase in domestic violence cases.

Some speakers said they've seen examples of what they consider excessive planning. For example, Judith Metcalf said she visited a middle school that had elaborate indoor exercise equipment.

"When I went to school, we went outside and we ran and played ball," she said.

Immediate task

Earlier Tuesday, state Sen. Joe Zarelli, R-Ridgefield, a member of the governor's budget panel, issued a statement saying Gaigne should call a special session to balance the current two-year budget, rather than make across-the-board cuts on her own.

With the prospect of extra help from Congress to cover Medicaid costs "all but dead," Zarelli said, the governor's best option is to bring legislators back to Olympia to address the $230 million general deficit in the current budget, which lists $230 million for current budget, which lists

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They leave the training," said Tucson Police Chief Roberto Villasenor. "No, because I think the law is poorly constructed." Virginia Rice, a spokeswoman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, declined to comment on preparations or the role federal authorities would play in enforcing the law, except to say ICE "focuses first on criminal aliens who pose a threat to our communities.

Arpaio vowed to arrest all illegal immigrants and make them spend time in his jail. Other police officials said they'd try to get the Border Patrol involved as often as possible to avoid the time and cost of booking people into jail.

Prosecutors are also preparing for a potential influx of cases. They are reminding officers that more than eight hours in regional freight passes through the CRC project area annually. They expect that figure to climb to $72 billion by 2030.

"We're in the freight movement business," Paulson said. "We need to continue to improve our infrastructure to meet our long-term needs.

Hospital adds support

Another regional player also chimed in with support for the CRC on Monday.

For the second week in a row, someone from the Legacy for the bridge work to happen said Legacy Salmon Creek spokesman Brian Willoughby.

"The current congestion makes getting doctors, equipment and patients across I-5— all time-sensitive issues— impossible to predict," he said.

"If an emergency vehicle needs to get through and the lift is up, or if traffic is congested and there's no shoulder, the vehicle is delayed," Willoughby said.

"We also had Legacy hospitals on both sides of the river seeing badly injured victims from the bridge corridor. He said the bridge's impact is more than twice as high as elsewhere, and during high tides, collisions go up by three to four times.

"Legacy decided as an organization early this year that this was a necessary project."