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Two very different views on how to handle the budget

By Mark DeSaulnier
GUEST COMMENTARY

CONTRA COSTA County was home to contrasting press conferences this week. Though both focused on the budget, they were very different events that showed very different understandings of the impact of the state's budget crisis on Californians.

On Monday, Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata, Sen. Tom Torlakson, Democratic legislators and I joined educators, parents, students and community activists. We discussed what a $4.8 billion cut to education will look like for kids and teachers. The press conference was held on the front lawn of a local school, open to all.

On Thursday, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger had a "discussion" with a hand-selected crowd of mostly business leaders. It largely ignored the pain that this budget crisis will inflict on working Californians.

He casually suggested his proposed 10 percent across-the-board cuts (including a $4.8 billion slice out of schools) won't impact the lives of Californians.

Californians have needs. Our education system is failing our kids. Our health care system is woefully inadequate. In these times of foreclosures and stagnant job growth, hard-working Californians are slipping through the huge holes in our social service safety net.

If enacted, the governor's plan would ensure the mediocrity (or worse) of our schools, health care system and social safety net. Do we really want to make a generational mistake by ensuring our state will never invest in our children and grandchildren?

What the governor refers to as "rattling people's cages" has a reality he fails to recognize.

Cheri Gain and her husband, educators in my district, received two pink slips in one household. They wonder where they'll find money to pay bills and keep the lights on. It is crazy to think that we are the wealthiest state, in the wealthiest country in the world and talk about cutting an education system that needs more resources, not less.

The governor has proposed cuts in Medi-Cal provider rates. But he fails to recognize that this will send federally-paid Medi-Cal recipients — our state's working poor — to the doors of county emergency rooms.

Democrats are asking that we close loopholes for wealthy yacht and airplane owners. We are asking that uber-prosperous oil companies pay fairly to protect needed services. We understand that cuts will yield a greater need for services rather than relieve the pressure on our system.

Democrats stand with parents and teachers in rejecting the governor's $4.8 billion in cuts to schools. We already rank 46th out of 50 states in per pupil spending and we're dead last in the number of counselors, librarians and support staff in our schools.

Democrats stand with doctors, nurses and other health care providers in rejecting a 10 percent slash to Medi-Cal provider rates. California already has among the worst reimbursement rates in the nation. More than half of the state's doctors don't take Medi-Cal because doing so will bankrupt their practices. Cuts to provider rates will significantly reduce access to doctors, hospitals and specialists for the more than 6 million working poor Californians with Medi-Cal coverage.

Since 1994, the California Budget Project reports that the state has passed a cumulative $12 billion in tax cuts. Why is restoring some of these revenues not on the table?

Despite what the governor and Republican legislators claim, a budget solution balanced between budget cuts and new revenues has worked in California's history. Even conservative Republicans like Ronald Reagan (who signed proportionately the largest tax increase in California's history) and Pete Wilson (who agreed to $1 in new revenues for every $1 in cuts) understood that they could not eviscerate state programs.

With Sen. Torlakson as author, and myself and Assemblywoman Loni Hancock principal co-authors, we're spearheading a constitutional amendment that would allow the Legislature to pass the budget and raise taxes with a simple majority. Forty-seven other states in the country allow their budgets to pass by a majority vote. Our bill will also maintain the need for a super-majority if the budget includes tax increases.

The governor's "discussions" fail to recognize the immediate need for solutions in this year's budget, particularly in education, and the budget process overall. We should be talking about the recommended cuts to non-essential services proposed by the Legislative Analyst's Office and structural budget reforms that stop the Republican minority from holding hostage our state's future and health.

If the governor and the Republicans continually fail to recognize the needs of Californians, we will not adequately address our unfortunate conditions: kids who cannot compete in the global economy, families having to choose between dental care and putting food on the table, an even higher dropout rate, and undereducated young people forced onto the streets and into crime.

The governor's current proposal will create one more room in this dysfunctional house. The governor and this Legislature have the incredible opportunity to make meaningful structural change to our budget process at a time when Californians are arguably more open to accepting reform.

No one denies that the state needs real, comprehensive structural reform that might well include spending caps. However, to enact those caps alone, as the governor proposes, will guarantee our current crisis of moving money to our prisons and away from what was once the finest public education system in the world.

We have an opportunity to make historic reforms if we roll up our sleeves and get to work. I look forward to that opportunity.

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