

GOP budget advice

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There's so much talk these days about budget woes -- city, county, state -- that one is tempted to stop listening. It all seems so hopeless, and endless. Every time it appears that things may be going a bit better, a new blip shows up on the radar screen, often in the form of a revenue shortfall that had been underestimated.

As with last year, the state of Maryland is desperately looking for ways to trim its budget. Gov. Martin O'Malley has already proposed \$1 billion in cuts to the fiscal 2011 budget. And as reported last week, Republicans in the General Assembly have upped the ante. A proposal by a pair of state senators, David Brinkley and E.J. Pipkin, and another by the House GOP caucus would add an additional \$700 million to \$1 billion in spending cuts.

The two Republican plans are understandably disturbing to a lot of people and to local government, because they both include funding reductions in areas that many consider essential to maintaining society -- not to mention that they have already felt the sting of the economic downturn and are struggling to maintain their programs and services.

Both the Brinkley/Pipkin and the House GOP caucus proposals include spending cuts in areas such as the environment, health, employee force, funding for local jurisdictions and, the big one, education.

When we say the big one, we mean that literally. The two senators propose that state spending on K-12 education be cut by \$590 million; they would also cut spending for higher education by \$68 million.

The GOP caucus has divided up the spending-cut pie a little differently. First, it goes easier on education budgets, cutting K-12 and higher ed spending by \$293 million and \$63 million, respectively.

But whereas the Brinkley/Pipkin proposal reduces local spending by \$38 million, the caucus cuts it by \$100 million.

Another significant difference in the two plans involves health spending. Brinkley and Pipkin would reduce it by \$12 million, whereas the caucus would slash it to the tune of \$210 million.

As we editorialized last week, we are happy that the Republican minority has seen fit to participate in seeking a solution to the state's fiscal crisis. Whether any of their suggestions will be adopted is unclear, but it is almost certain that many areas they have identified cannot escape spending cuts altogether.

These two proposals are broken down by the numbers on the website of the Maryland Budget and Tax Policy Institute (www.marylandpolicy.org/documents/Mar10Report_000.pdf) and are well worth a look.

The better informed residents are about this budget crisis and about suggestions, whatever their source, to address it, the better.

It's past time to get personally involved, but better late than never. Being well-informed and voicing your opinions to your representatives in government is critical to a well-functioning democracy, especially in trying times such as these. As the old expression goes, "It's your money."