

Republicans propose budget solution

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Bill comes day before Democrat-GOP meeting of minds on state spending plan

by Douglas Tallman | Staff Writer

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ANNAPOLIS — Two Republican senators have submitted legislation to make sweeping changes to the Maryland budget, in advance of an unusual appeal from the legislature's Democratic leadership to hear GOP spending proposals.

The 72-page bill, from Sens. David R. Brinkley and E.J. Pipkin, nips and tucks at the state budget from nearly all departments, including state aid to school boards and economic development.

"This takes us where we need to go in terms of putting the budget in balance this year, next year and beyond," said Pipkin (R-Dist. 36) of Elkton.

Brinkley said the bill attacks automatic increases in funding in the outyears of the budget.

"If there's more money, the governor can always fund it," he said.

The bill comes a day before the Democratic leadership has planned an unusual meeting to hear GOP budget proposals. Because Republican senators believe the meeting could become a sideshow, the caucus is not taking part officially, although individual GOP senators are welcome to offer their ideas.

The House Republican caucus is expected to offer its budget ideas.

The meeting follows months of jockeying between leaders of the two parties. Republicans claim they get shut out of the resources to develop budget ideas. Democrats say the Republicans have equal access to the legislature's analysts.

"I don't want anyone to leave here without an opportunity to present important budget discussions and proposals," House Speaker Michael E. Busch said Monday. "Hopefully, there are some good suggestions. We're trying to build a budget in extraordinarily tough times."

Brinkley, a member of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee, said he would discuss details of the bill if asked at the meeting.

Among other things, Brinkley (R-Dist. 4) of New Market and Pipkin propose:

- Repealing the state's fund that promotes stem cell research.
- Freezing state aid for police protection at \$45.4 million for the next five years.
- Trimming funding for the state's 24 soil conservation districts by \$400,000.

- Reducing spending on economic development by \$1 million to \$5 million.
- Scaling back money to be used for rural economic development by more than \$8.5 million over the next five years.
- Changing the way school aid is calculated.
- Cutting aid to health departments from \$41 million to about \$37.3 million.

Once the federal stimulus money dries up, the bill would make optional funding for the geographic cost of education index, a funding plan that funnels money into jurisdictions where school costs are higher.

Sales tax revenue that would support transportation would revert back to the general fund, with the stipulation that state transit services increase revenue from fares, Brinkley said.