



Lawmakers warn local-aid scenario could get worse

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BOSTON — Lawmakers are starting to prepare local officials for the possibility that the coming local-aid cut could be larger than they expected.

Gov. Deval Patrick's proposed budget calls for a 7 percent reduction in the state funding that local school districts and municipalities rely on for their budgets.

That cut was described as painful but manageable by several town administrators this winter when released.

But some lawmakers are now saying Patrick's numbers may have been too optimistic, and that his budget plan relies too much on cost savings dependent on reform measures that haven't passed yet.

They are telling officials that 7 percent is the "best-case scenario" and that nobody should expect any better news. Some are warning that the cut could be as deep as 10 percent.

Each year, the governor takes the first swing at the state budget plan in January, followed by the House in April and the Senate in May. A compromise version of the two legislative budgets gets passed into law by the end of the state fiscal year on June 30.

But the tricky part for local officials is that their annual town meetings will be taking place in the next few weeks, long before state lawmakers can tell them exactly how much funding they will get.

Cities and towns are moving ahead with budget plans based on the governor's 7 percent cut. Depending on whom you ask, that's either prudent or a bad idea.

State Rep. Garrett Bradley, D-Hingham, has met recently with officials in Hingham, Hull and Cohasset.

"I reminded them these are not locked in stone, and things could change," Bradley said. "We are trying to get to the governor's numbers. We cannot guarantee that we can."

State Rep. James Cantwell, D-Marshfield, said there is some concern in the House that the governor's budget is based on estimated cost savings that are not achievable.

He cited Patrick's plan to reform the state's public defender system and expand the bottle redemption law to water bottles and sports drinks. Cost savings attached to those plans are being viewed as too high, Cantwell said.

He has met recently with town administrators in Marshfield and Scituate and told them that "the best-case scenario is to meet the governor's number."

Republican lawmakers, however, are delivering much sterner warnings.

State Rep. Geoff Diehl, R-Whitman, who serves on the House's budget-writing Ways and Means Committee, said he is telling officials that the cut could be 10 percent.

The House estimate could be announced as soon as two weeks from now, Diehl said.

State Sen. Robert Hedlund, R-Weymouth, declined to provide an estimate for the cut, but he said the governor's numbers are "way too optimistic."

"I would be very careful basing anything on the governor's projected local-aid numbers," he said.

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