

Massachusetts lawmakers criticize Governor Patrick's budget plan

By **Corey Kane**

Patriot Ledger State House Bureau

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BOSTON — Legislators showed their unhappiness with Gov. Deval Patrick's plans to raise taxes on some food items and close a Taunton mental care facility as hearings on the governor's proposed \$32.3 billion began Friday.

"I don't want to burden hard-working people in the commonwealth," state Rep. Angelo D'Emilia, R-Bridgewater, said in an interview after the House Ways and Means Committee grilled Finance Secretary Jay Gonzales on the administration's contention that new revenues and spending cuts are needed to balance the budget.

"I don't think we have a choice anymore," Gonzalez said. "We have to change government."

Gonzalez said his office projects a \$940 million increase in revenue for the state, but warned it won't be available to increase spending. The governor's budget still projects a \$1.3 billion gap between revenue and spending.

Gonzalez spoke about the controversial proposed tax hike on cigarettes; taxes on other tobacco products; the end of the sales tax waiver on candy and soda; and an expansion of the bottle deposit.

The proposals would add up to \$215 million in increased revenue, helping to close the budget gap.

The tax proposals have received little support in the House, with Speaker Robert DeLeo promising no new taxes last week.

Local representatives, especially Republicans, followed the speaker's lead. Rep. Geoff Diehl, R-Whitman, said instead of taxing consumers, the state should focus instead on reducing tax credits.

"This is where you see money flying out of the State House," Diehl said.

He used the example of tax credits given to Evergreen Solar, a company which then shut down its operations in Massachusetts. He also mentioned the California solar energy company Solyndra, which went bankrupt after receiving \$535 million in federal loan guarantees.

But Gonzalez said the tax hikes enjoy popular support in the state, noting that one poll showed 69 percent in favor of the candy and soda tax and 77 percent supporting the bottle bill expansion.

A second point of contention in the governor's budget was the proposal to close Taunton State Hospital and moving the patients to a facility in Worcester.


Both D'Emilia and Diehl oppose the plan.

Diehl said the state has not even done a cost-benefit analysis of the impact of the closing. "I think you are currently under-serving an area," Diehl said.

The hearing is the first of many on the upcoming budget, which is due for a vote by June 30.

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