

Time running out for Roberts' budget plans

SALEM (AP) — A legislative panel is trying to get a jump on state budget problems, but don't look for many hard numbers until after the Nov. 3 election.

So far, the committee has come up with a numberless framework.

"We've kept this very non-partisan," said Senate President John Kitzhaber, D-Roseburg. "We did not want to involve the process in legislative election-year politics, and we kept the schedule in line with that."

Kitzhaber is co-chairman of the Joint Committee on Oregon's Future, a panel that includes most legislative leaders.

The committee was set up last year to monitor Gov. Barbara Roberts' unfolding plans to reorganize and streamline government.

It added the role of budget review after a turbulent special session last July, in which legislators refused to send the governor's tax plan to the voters.

A subcommittee has been poring over budget details since

then, trying to determine what's essential and what can be cut.

It sent a report to the full committee last week that proposes few major changes. The document outlines, without any numbers, what effects cuts might have.

Kitzhaber said the report is a framework for reduced spending once a few crucial numbers are known.

The 1993 Legislature probably will be handed a nearly \$1-billion problem.

That amount is the gap between expected general fund revenue and the cost of continuing state programs at current levels. It allows for inflation and automatic increases in expenses, such as new staff or pay raises.

The governor's budget staff says the gap could be as large as \$1.3 billion. Some lawmakers think that's too high.

The full committee meets later this month to try to settle on a specific number. The work then shifts to deciding what

cuts can be made to narrow the gap.

That process would end up with what Kitzhaber calls a "core budget" to support state services that are considered essential.

The final step would be deciding how taxes might have to be raised to eliminate the remainder of the gap.

House Speaker Larry Campbell, R-Eugene, the committee's other co-chairman, said people shouldn't conclude there won't be cuts because the subcommittee hasn't specified many.

"We were saying what activities of government we want to continue," Campbell said. "But when we say we want to continue to have a Corrections Department, that doesn't mean we can't make changes. The core is not the whole apple."

Kitzhaber said the process was meant to shift attitudes about dealing with the budget.

"The debate has been cast as to what we have to cut," he said. "We recast it into what we have to spend to maintain the

integrity of state government."

Lawmakers might decide they have to spend more than is in sight. That usually translates to tax increases, but nobody is talking about that before the election.

Kitzhaber, who's leaving the Legislature, had proposed a brief special session late this year to consider a short-term tax boost to balance the 1993-95 budget.

That would leave the 1993 session free to look for long-range solutions to the drain on the budget from the Measure 5 property tax limit, he said.

He found little enthusiasm for the idea.

"People prefer a comprehensive solution," he said.

Both he and Campbell said the idea of a post-election special session remains up in the air.

Meanwhile, Roberts by law has to submit a proposed 1993-95 budget by Dec. 1. That work goes on aside from whatever the legislative committee does.

Group gives Oregon C- on children

PORTLAND (AP) — The state earned only a C-minus for its care of children on a "report card" issued Monday by an advocacy group.

Children First for Oregon rated five broad categories to determine how children are being treated.

The state earned a C-minus for safety from abuse or violent crime, a D for investing in family health and support, a C-plus for early child care, a D for teen care and a C for education.

"This report card sounds an alarm that should motivate each of us to action," said the group's president, Carol Metzler, of Eugene.

"Whether the issue is child poverty, child care, child abuse or teen births, we are not valuing our children," Metzler said. "Oregon's economic, social and political future depends on the well-being of our children and families."

She said thousands of copies of the group's report card would be distributed statewide to urge more attention to child care issues.

The report card said minority children fared worse overall.

Children First is a statewide child advocacy organization formed by business leaders and private citizens.

Scenic tunnel for bikers in danger of destruction

WALLACE, Idaho (AP) — Mountain bikers like to cross the St. Paul Tunnel on the Idaho-Montana border, but the subterranean adventure may be over.

Deemed too dangerous for human passage, the U.S. Forest Service is planning to seal the abandoned 1.8-mile burrow by spring. The train tunnel starts a scenic descent to Avery, Idaho.

The bikers will try to win the support of the Idaho Tourism Council by taking some members into the tunnel.

"Riding through here is an adventure," said Dean Cooper as he splashed through hub-deep water on Friday. Cooper is marketing manager for Lookout Pass ski area.

Last summer, more people discovered the thrill of the deep tunnel as Lookout Pass's new managers rented bikes and passed out trail maps. Next summer, they would like to provide guided bike tours around the area, Cooper said.

The crown jewel of the tours would be through the St. Paul Tunnel and down the

gentle grade of the former railroad line over seven trestles and through eight more tunnels to the Wallace-Avery road.

"The railroad gave it to (the public) for the Forest Service to manage. Then (the Forest Service) put these slabs up without telling anyone," Cooper said, referring to concrete and dirt berms blocking the entrance to the St. Paul Tunnel.

Water seeps through the ground and drains out of cracks in the ceiling and walls, causing thin stalactites to form.

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