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Legislature urged to explore more budget options

Groups want essential services protected

By Marcy L. Velte

A coalition of advocates supported by several state legislators have launched an ad campaign asking New Yorkers to demand their representatives in the Legislature make better choices to balance the state budget.

The Better Choice Budget Campaign is a coalition of statewide and local labor, faith, human service and environmental organizations that have come together, along with several lawmakers, to promote balancing the budget through various revenue-raising actions and tactical cuts.

The coalition argues that "rather than slashing education, health care and other vital services that New York families depend on, the governor and Legislature should make a better choice," a subject most of the advocates present spoke about and legislators agreed with.

The group says the ideas it has generated should be explored by the Legislature before cutting essential state services. The group's main goals are to close corporate tax loopholes and to ask Wall Street "to help bail out main street."

One ad, which began airing last week, shows foreclosed homes, struggling families and closed shops. It ends with the words: "Tell Albany the choice is clear. Make corporations pay their fair share."

At an April 7 press conference Ron Deutsch, executive director of New Yorkers for Fiscal Fairness, a leading group in the coalition, said, "We acknowledge the need for cuts," but they need to be strategic and should be complemented by revenue raisers to avoid drastic slashes to the state budget.

"Everything needs to be on the table," according to Sen. Neil Breslin, D-Bethlehem, who said all possible revenue streams need to be considered. He agreed with Deutsch that New York needs strategic cuts to avoid devastating essential programs unnecessarily.

Deutsch stressed that not every lawmaker at the press conference to launch the campaign supported every option the coalition was presenting to prevent cuts but that everyone supported fighting nonessential cuts.

Making an appearance at the press conference was the Adirondack Council's mascot Bucky the Beaver. A person in the Bucky costume was protesting proposed cuts to the state's Environmental Protection Fund.

The coalition members said that along with closing corporate tax loopholes, Wall Street should now bail out main street and a temporary tax should be placed on all "extravagant" Wall Street bonuses over a certain level. They would also like to temporarily reduce the stock transfer rebate from 100 to 80 percent. Currently, stock brokers get back 100 percent of the tax they must pay for transferring a stock.

Assemblyman James Brennan, D-Brooklyn, called for a modest increases to business taxes and a cap on the use of tax credits.

"Business taxes on profits have been cut substantially over the past 20 years. It is not unjust to ask businesses to pay a little more to assure that all New Yorkers receive essential public services," said Brennan.

Assemblywomen Aileen Gunther, D-Forestburgh, said she supported a tax on Wall Street bonuses but was disappointed to be at an event to talk about balancing the budget six days after the missed budget deadline. She said the bonuses should definitely be looked at and suggested placing a one-year sunset on any new or increased tax.

Assemblywomen Barbara Lifton continued by saying, "We need to roll back tax breaks for New York's wealthiest citizens."

Lifton, D-Ithaca, said tax breaks given in New York are currently more than every other state combined. She said the state needs to resist egregious cuts that will only worsen the economy and to bring back the millionaire tax this year.

"If I was queen of the state I would do more, but I'm not," said Lifton.

Assemblywomen Deborah Glick, D-Manhattan, agreed with Lifton, saying many New Yorkers are accusing the state of "engaging in wild spending," but argued it wasn't spending that was harming the state but rather the large amount of tax breaks offered to the wealthy.

"Tax cuts are a state expenditure," said Glick, comparing the tax cuts implemented by former Gov. George E. Pataki a few years ago to President George W. Bush's tax cuts that benefitted the rich.

Glick also adamantly supported the coalition's idea to reduce the amount of work contracted by New York to independent consultants instead of to members of the state workforce.

"Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent by the state on private consultants," said Glick.

She said state employees should be doing the work instead of hired consultants. "These wrong decisions are costing us," said Glick.

Other ideas presented by the coalition included taxing plastic shopping bags, passing the sugar-sweetened beverages tax, lowering prescription drugs prices by negotiating fair deals with drug

companies and ensuring that sales of cigarettes on American Indian reservations to non-native Americans are properly taxed.

Members of the coalition said if the deep cuts proposed in the state Legislature's 2010-2011 budget resolutions are passed, vital services such as Medicaid, homeless shelters and legal aid will diminish. In addition, education funding will decrease and more jobs will be lost.

"This is not the time for actions that will hinder the growth of New York's economy or hurt the children and families hit hardest by the economic downturn," a statement from the coalition said. "There are better choices."



Ron Deutsch, executive director for New Yorkers for Fiscal Fairness and the Adirondack Council's Bucky the Beaver high-five at a press conference where The Better Choice Budget Campaign coalition launched its ad campaign that addresses spending choices being made by state leaders. Photo by Emily Claire Atkin, The Legislative Gazette.