

Mayors blast Assembly over funding

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HARTFORD — The state's big-city mayors on Monday predicted dire consequences if the General Assembly finishes the legislative session without approving more funding for municipalities and nonprofit agencies.

They complained that they cannot even get a meeting with legislative leaders and the governor to voice concerns about the \$18.2-billion budget that takes effect July 1.

In a news conference in the Legislative Office Building, the mayors joined union officials and nonprofit social-service providers in a last-ditch attempt to persuade lawmakers to reopen the second year of the biennial budget approved last year.

"It is clear that this is a budget that will increase taxes at a period of time when foreclosures are as high as they've been since the Great Depression," New Haven Mayor John DeStefano Jr. said. "This would result in a dramatic increases in property taxes across the state, further increasing pressures on working families."

DeStefano joined other chief elected officials from throughout the state, including Hartford Mayor Eddie Perez and Stamford Mayor Dannel Malloy, to warn that the budget agreed upon last Friday would fail to provide necessary funding for early childhood reading and the battle against violence.

"This is a clear statement of policy that says do nothing, stick your head in the sand," he said. "It is a vision that lacks any kind of direction and speaks to mediocrity." Malloy said the budget would have "a tsunami effect" on towns and cities such as Bridgeport, which is facing the largest number of foreclosures in the state.

"What are we going to do? We're going to tell the people of Bridgeport you're going to have less services, fewer policemen and we're going to raise your taxes," Malloy said.

"You know what the people of Connecticut want?" Malloy asked. "They want a tax system that makes some sense. They want a Legislature that stops balancing the budget on the backs of municipalities in the good times and drowning the municipalities in the bad times." The mayors asked lawmakers to reconsider their decision to accept the second year of the budget without changes.

They said an adjustment to hotel taxes could help provide cities and towns with millions of extra dollars to enhance payments-in-lieu-of-tax-exempt (PILOT) properties, including hospitals and colleges.

The chief elected officials also voiced support for raising the sales tax on tobacco or creating a new tax on delivery services.

The delivery levy was approved in the legislative Finance Committee, but was rejected last week by Democratic leaders and Republican Gov. M. Jodi Rell when they announced that the existing second-year budget would remain in place.

Bridgeport Mayor Bill Finch, who did not attend the Monday event, said in a phone interview Monday that a better PILOT reimbursement for the state could have meant \$4.5 million under a previous Democratic budget that was abandoned last week.

"Every time I go to the Capitol it gets worse," Finch said, stressing that he's facing a \$16-million deficit. "All we're asking the state to do is pay their obligations."

He said that for years the state has ignored the requirement that it pay towns and cities 77 percent of the value of tax-exempt property.

"When they don't pay even the full percentage they're required to, it's tough for us to go back to the taxpayers and say you have to pay more," Finch said.

He said that if the budget goes into effect unchanged on July 1 about 370 Bridgeport children will not be attending full-day kindergarten under the early reading success legislation that was funded for one year last year.

Sal Luciano, president of the 35,000-member American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Council 4, said that this year towns and cities are laying off teacher's aides, custodians and community nurses, but next year it could get much worse.

"Maybe 20 years ago it was OK to tell mayors to tighten their belts, but right now they're just tightening the noose around their own necks," Luciano said.

John Olsen, president of the state AFL-CIO, said the General Assembly is missing a chance to "enable" cities and towns with some form of additional tax revenue. "Right now the only alternative they have is to cut services or raise the property taxes and I don't think that's a fair solution," Olsen said.

Terry Edelstein, president and CEO of the Connecticut Community Providers Association, said in a statement Monday that the budget deal last week means nonprofit agencies will "face the harsh reality of eliminating services, cutting back on staff and telling hundreds and thousands of the state's most vulnerable residents that they can no longer provide the essential services they need."

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