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## Dithering while Conn. sinks in red ink

Frozen with fear when confronting a monster largely of its own making, the Democratic leadership in the General Assembly is readying to "gavel in and gavel out" when legislators return Tuesday for a special session, ordered by Republican Gov. M. Jodi Rell to deal with a budget deficit approaching \$500 million. In other words, the Democrats in control of the legislature may once again ignore the fiscal crisis that confronts the state and instead head home for the holidays.

Sound familiar? Last year Gov. Rell urged lawmakers to deal with a mounting deficit before they returned for the regular session. Her reasoning was sound then and it is now - solve an ongoing deficit before tackling future budgets. But the Democrats dithered, choosing to deal with the problem when they returned for a regular session. Ultimately they "solved" that deficit by taking out a \$900 million loan, then passed a new budget that was running a deficit before the printer finished spitting out copies.

No one in the Democratic leadership, it appears, wants to face the reality of a dramatic decrease in tax revenues tied to a prolonged recession. By all reports, the Democratic caucus cannot agree how to proceed, likely leading to inaction on Tuesday. Support and faith in Senate President Donald E. Williams Jr., D-Brooklyn, has severely eroded. House Speaker Christopher G. Donovan, D-Meriden, may have a stellar liberal record of supporting health care for the poor, children's programs and organized labor, but he seems ill-suited for a time that requires tough decisions that will harm some of those very constituencies.

Many experienced Democrats represent southeastern Connecticut in the House and Senate, but they have shown little ability to influence party leadership and divert the ship of state from the looming waterfall. Rep. Diana Urban, D-North Stonington, has long advocated restructuring government and allocating resources based on results. The leadership has placated her with studies and trial balloons, but as of yet no real change of substance. Among Democrats only Rep. Steven Mikutel, D-Griswold, voted against the budget and called it what it was - a farce.

The Republican minority wants to go through with a planned cut in the sales tax from 6 percent to 5.5 percent, accelerating the revenue shortfall. They would balance the budget by magically cutting state government across the board by 6.5 percent, ignoring the fact that a two-year moratorium on state worker layoffs - given in return for benefit and wage concessions - makes that practically impossible.

Gov. Rell's approach is to "spread the pain." Her suggested cuts include slashing \$84 million in aid to municipalities and at the same time reducing by 25 percent allocations to community action agencies. These agencies assist the most vulnerable, running group homes for people with mental illness and cognitive and developmental disabilities. They give shelter to the homeless, provide child care to the needy and run heating and rental assistance programs.

The state long ago should have expanded the role of these private providers, not cut them, but that would mean reducing state union jobs. In 2007 the state Department of Developmental Services found, on average, a private nonprofit group home spends \$87,221 per client, a similar state program \$238,624. Day care programs showed likewise savings, \$20,052 compared to \$85,298.

The point is that Connecticut needs a strategic plan to reduce government spending with no special protection for any politically sacred cows. If Democrats do not get this right they could experience well-earned losses in the November 2010 election.