

The Bemidji Pioneer

Pioneer Editorial: Budget will affect quality of life in state

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Gov. Tim Pawlenty can be given an “A” for proposing a biennium budget that balances, and perhaps even that it does so without raising taxes. But he gets an “F” for a budget that will never pass the Legislature, and unless he shows some drastic movement, will prolong a debate well into the summer.

The Republican governor likes to equate the state budget to the family at the kitchen table figuring out their bills. Can’t write checks for more than what’s in the checkbook, he says. But state government is not like the family, which can seek second job, move into cheaper quarters or take out a loan.

The suggestions Gov. Pawlenty makes would change the quality of life for Minnesotans, reversing a lifestyle that our forefathers have built upon since statehood 150 years ago.

A large portion of his proposal is a deep cut in state business taxes, an \$860 million item. It follows the old Republican trickle-down theory in place since the early 1980s, something a future Republican president called “voodoo economics” and found not to work. At the same time, the governor proposes to remove the health safety net for nearly 85,000 poor adults, slice payments to hospitals that serve poor people and slack back on payments to long-term care providers.

He proposes a slight increase to K-12 education but on his terms — paying teachers for performance according to how well students do according to one-size-fits all standards that will no doubt penalize school districts with special needs or high poverty children. And, at a time when a well-educated workforce is needed to pull us out of this sour economy, he would slice higher ed funding by 8.2 percent but would freeze tuition increases at no more than inflation. That would likely mean the loss of whole curricula from smaller state universities, limiting what is offered in rural areas and certainly not supporting the changing curricula for a 21st century workforce.

And again cities will be asked to bail out the state budget through a 25 percent loss in Local Government Aid — \$1.37 million to Bemidji over two years. Since property tax increases are capped, look to closing the public library, forget about removing snow from walks, and fear the loss of police and firefighters.

A greater crime is a return to budget gimmicks last seen when the state tackled the 2003 multibillion-dollar deficit. The governor proposes to delay more than \$1 billion in state payments to school districts, which already suffer from cash-flow problems, and to buy \$1 billion in bonds for public sewer and wastewater projects to be paid back from annual tobacco settlement payments — which are supposed to go to smoking cessation and healthy lifestyles projects.

Lawmakers had a tough job to begin with, but the governor’s proposal just made it tougher.