



Editorial: Sad fact is, state sits in financial mess

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The 86th Legislature convened Tuesday in St. Paul. The big agenda item is no surprise: the gigantic budget crisis.

The deficit likely will exceed \$6 billion, and there are no easy fixes or simple solutions.

The national, indeed global, economic downturn has hit Minnesota hard. That's a fact.

We think the facts also make clear that Minnesota has spent beyond its means. Budget increases between 9 and 12 percent have caught up with lawmakers.

The combination of the recession and overspending will force lawmakers to make tough choices to eliminate a sea of red ink. Fact: Minnesota must balance its budget. The Constitution requires that.

Tim Pawlenty will fight to preserve his reputation as an "no new tax" governor. Democrats, who control both the House and Senate, will want to preserve all the big program increases they pushed through last session.

The truth is the state can't do both.

Here are a few more hard – and local – facts:

Goodhue County and its cities, especially the county seat, meanwhile raised tax levies for 2009. Regardless, cuts in state aid last month hurt them.

If more state aid cuts come to pass, taxpayers can expect either an additional shift of the tax burden to local property taxes or significant reductions in basic city and county services.

(We can't say for a fact that the state will cut more aid this spring and that local governments will raise property taxes again for 2010, but we're betting they'll try.)

Let's not forget that Red Wing School District resorted to a two-part referendum last fall and got voters to face the fact that state education funding hasn't met the grade. Sadly, that vote mirrors actions across Minnesota, where 90 percent of districts have excess levies.

No matter how they might try to shuffle the facts, Minnesota lawmakers have few choices. None is palatable. Raising taxes in a recession is never a good idea. Cutting basic programs undermines the quality of life that distinguishes Minnesota.

And the fact is that no one really knows when the national recession will end and recovery begin.

Lawmakers must face that facts and get to work.