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Budget-balancing axes being sharpened

9,800 people could be laid off as agencies seek ways to trim billions

By **KATE ALEXANDER**
AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN
Sept. 19, 2010, 9:51PM

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PROPOSED CUTS

- **Department of Criminal Justice:** 7,353
- **Youth Commission:** 460
- **Comptroller of Public Accounts:** 315
- **Department of Insurance:** 186
- **Department of Public Safety:** 120

Note: Includes both layoffs and the elimination of vacant positions.

Source: 2012-13 Legislative Appropriations Requests submitted to the Legislative Budget Board

To the children at the Texas School for the Deaf, Mary Monckton is a sunny and engaging speech pathologist determined to help them learn to communicate.

But to legislators, Monckton is an expense that Texas might not be able to afford.

Hers is one of 9,800 jobs that state agencies have offered up for elimination as legislators prepare to trim billions of dollars from the 2012-13 state budget, according to an American-Statesman analysis of agency budget requests.

\$21 billion in red ink

While some positions might be preserved or are already vacant, thousands of workers could likely be laid off as the state grapples with a projected two-year budget shortfall approaching \$21 billion.

Mike Gross, vice president of the Texas State Employees Union, said he expects there will be much more pressure to lay off employees next year than in 2003, the last time Texas faced a similar budget crunch. State leaders have again vowed to close the gap without raising taxes, but the magnitude of the budget problem is greater this time, in part because of the ongoing recession.

"Texas is not a poor state," Gross said. "We can afford to do better by our people."

Worst-case scenario

While agencies tend to offer worst-case scenarios to open the budget negotiations, there is some truth to the grim projections, said Talmadge Heflin, director of the Center for Fiscal Policy at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a think tank that promotes limited government.

"If they show the legislators all these bad things will happen, maybe it will soften their hearts a little bit or loosen their pocketbooks," said Heflin, a former legislator.

For Claire Bugen, superintendent of the School for the Deaf, losing employees is agonizing.

Bugen, as with other state agency leaders, was required to propose cuts totaling 10 percent of the school's general revenue budget, which came to \$3.6 million.

She nixed a summer school program, as well as building repair, some laundry services, computers, furniture and more. Still \$1.2 million short of the reduction target, the only thing left to cut was people.

"Every little position you lose in a school like ours has an impact," said Bugen, who says the School for the Deaf should be exempt from the cuts, as are traditional school districts. "We're so small. How is our \$3,637,402 going to help? It's not going to help the state of Texas balance its budget, but it would do so much for us."

Schools not in the clear

Therein lies the problem for Texas legislators.

What's really on the table?

The state's \$87 billion general revenue fund pays for a handful of behemoths — public education, health and human services, criminal justice - and a bunch of relatively small agencies.

For now, state leaders have protected public school aid from the cuts, though people from across the political spectrum say it is unlikely that schools will be left untouched.

"If the Legislature is going to balance this budget primarily through budget cuts, nothing can be off the table," said Dale Craymer, president of the Texas Taxpayers and Research Association.

All told, the 10 percent cuts could reduce state spending by \$3 billion if fully implemented, according to the Legislative Budget Board.

Another \$1.2 billion could be saved if the 5 percent cuts enacted in the current budget are continued.

That leaves a long way to go to close a \$21 billion gap, even with an \$8 billion rainy day fund.

Higher education hit

Key legislators are already pushing to exempt from layoffs 7,300 prison guards, parole officers and other corrections workers at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

On the flip side, colleges and universities are expected to add to the final job loss tally when the budget is completed next year. The schools were not included in the American-Statesman analysis because they were not required to report the full impact of the potential cuts in their budget proposals.

But higher education shouldered a disproportionately large amount of the \$1.2 billion trim from the current budget, and that is not expected to change next year.

The University of Texas, for instance, has said 600 jobs could be eliminated if a full 10 percent cut is required. At Texas A&M University, the number of affected jobs would be 400.

In 2003, most of the 10,000 eliminated jobs were cleared through attrition and a retirement incentive. About 1,400 workers were laid off at the Department of Criminal Justice and the Texas Education Agency.

But 2011 might necessitate more actual layoffs because the budget situation is worse, and the state has fewer budget-cutting options than in 2003, Craymer said.

Because of the recession, there are also fewer vacant positions to scuttle without affecting a person, said Andy Homer, government relations director for the Texas Public Employees Association.

"The turnover numbers have just gone down," Homer said. "People who have a job are sticking with it."

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Lcpldevildog wrote:

But this governor says texas has not problems and has been saying it. We can start with the \$10,000 dollar a month mansion he lives in plus all the ammenities that go with it that is provided by the taxpayer. That can surely be cut.

9/19/2010 10:26:35 PM

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Marty81259 wrote:

As far as the school districts go- the first to be cut should be bilingual education. English speaking kids should come FIRST when it comes to state spending. Take a look at your school district's website and see the personnel hired for bilingual education, especially if you live in or near the east side of Houston. The spending on the Spanish speaking population is obscene. Should not be happening.

9/19/2010 10:37:03 PM

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Harleyjokim wrote:

Maybe we could start with the ridiculous \$5 million that we are paying Mack Brown to coach NON-PROFIT AMATURE COLLEGIATE football before we start cutting people teaching deaf chinldren. I think if we pull up the "Good old Boy" rug we could find \$\$\$ BILLIONS in easy cuts that we would probably never miss. Unless of course UT football is more important than deaf kids. :)

9/19/2010 10:31:20 PM

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cfisd4change wrote:

when people from corporations take a cut in pay to allow the corp to survive without lay-offs, our government officials should do the same. enough said

9/19/2010 10:41:19 PM

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drstock wrote:

But Gov. Perry thinks that millionaire land owners needed that tax cut.

9/19/2010 10:29:27 PM

Recommend: [\(59\)](#) [\(19\)](#) [\[Report abuse\]](#)



Whatgives wrote:


Harleyjokim wrote: "Maybe we could start with the ridiculous \$5 million that we are paying Mack Brown to coach NON-PROFIT AMATURE COLLEGIATE football..."

Your outrage would be more understandable if Brown was actually costing the State money, but he's not. The UT football program generates far more revenue than it costs; if it were a business, it'd be making a tidy profit. Those revenues cover the costs of Brown's salary and all the other football-related expenses, with money left over to help pay for many of the UT sports that *don't* pay their own way, like track and field, golf, tennis, etc.

Brown's success with UT football helps UT budgets overall, it doesn't hurt them.

9/20/2010 8:01:12 AM

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m9777 wrote:

Wonder what Bill White's mansion cost? No? OK...go ahead and complain about Perry's house! Stupid, liberal left!

9/20/2010 7:58:20 AM

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GandhiMahatma wrote:

poor fiscal management...It is time for a change in Texas...get out and vote in November.

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