

No pay cuts for Texas' top govt. executives

By **JIM VERTUNO**

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Published: 6:22 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 3, 2011

Gov. Rick Perry, statewide elected officials and appointed agency leaders — many of whom are paid \$150,000 or more — may not personally share the financial pain that teachers, disabled care workers and other state employees are expected to feel when Texas swings a budget ax aimed at trimming its \$15 billion budget deficit.

House and Senate draft budgets make no cuts to the salaries of Texas' statewide elected officials — all Republicans — and the leaders of the state's largest agencies, including the Texas Education Agency, the department of Health and Human Services, and the departments of Aging and Disability Services and Family Protective Services.

The proposed budgets arrive as Texas teachers face layoffs or pay cuts, advocates for the mentally and physically disabled worry about pending cuts to health care and in-home services., and Texans are being warned to brace for large-scale cuts to public education and social services that will be felt across the Lone Star landscape for the next two years.

Teachers, who are bracing for up to 100,000 layoffs across the state, heard school administrators this week ask lawmakers for permission to cut their pay. They may not like hearing Education Commissioner Robert Scott won't see his \$186,300 salary cut, said Clay Robison, spokesman for the Texas State Teachers Association.

"If there's going to be misery, misery should be shared," said Robison said.

The teacher's group doesn't want any cuts, but if they happen "fair is fair," he said.

The Senate's chief budget writer, Sen. Steve Ogden of Bryan, said Thursday he didn't remember if agency leaders recommending cutting their own salaries.

Lawmakers didn't reduce salaries because "even if you cut 'em in half, it's not going to be that much money" in a two-year budget that currently spends \$182 billion, Ogden said.

Ogden said lawmakers likely will consider cutting executive salaries as they fine-tune the budget.

"I think Texans are willing to accept cuts, they understand the deal. Our responsibility is to do it in such a way that they perceive it to be fair," Ogden told The Associated Press after a second day of public testimony from people pleading lawmakers not to cut services for the disabled.

"What we've heard for the last two days is that lots and lots of people don't think that these cuts are fair. If we end up cutting, directly or indirectly teacher salaries, I think the perception is that if rank-and-file have to take a hit, why not the big dog?" Ogden said.

"I think that's a legitimate question and I think it's something we've got to consider," Ogden said. "If we're protecting one class (versus) another, that would be a mistake."

The House's chief budget writer, Rep. Jim Pitts, R-Waxahachie, was traveling Thursday and did not immediately return telephone messages seeking comment.

As governor, Perry is paid \$150,000 annually, the same salary paid to Attorney General Greg Abbott, Comptroller Susan Combs and 16 of the state's 18 judges on the Supreme Court and Court of Criminal Appeals. The chief justice of the Supreme Court and presiding judge of the Court of Criminal Appeals make \$152,500.

State Land Commissioner Jerry Patterson, Agriculture Commissioner Todd Staples and Railroad Commissioners Elizabeth Ames Jones, Michael Williams and David Porter all make \$137,500.

Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, who is elected statewide and presides over the Senate, is paid a state senator's salary of \$7,200.

Agency heads typically make much more than Perry and the other elected officials.

The House and Senate draft budgets would slash about \$5 billion from public education, but leave's Scott's salary intact.

The draft budgets make no cuts to Health and Human Services Commission Thomas Sueh's salary of \$210,000 even as lawmakers consider slashing \$2.3 billion from Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program and other health and human services.

Perry spokesman Mark Miner said lawmakers are still early in the budget-writing process and noted Perry's office has not yet submitted its budget proposal.

When asked if it will include salary cuts for top executives, Miner said, "We'll be announcing the governor's budget soon."

Former state Rep. Talmadge Heflin was the House's chief budget writer when Texas had to make big budget cuts in 2003. He now works at the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation.

Heflin did not cut executive salaries then 2003 but now says he should have. Even if it saves only a small amount of money, the symbolism is powerful, Heflin said.

"It's symbolic, but it's needed," Heflin said. "The Legislature should make the reductions. Not to be punitive, but we said everybody's got to share."

February 03, 2011 07:22 PM EST

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