

Protesters rally to protect safety-net services

By Catherine Candisky



Daine Taarow, left, and Chris Norek, both from Cleveland, join a gathering of about 300 at the One Ohio Now rally. Speakers yesterday called on state lawmakers to protect state-funded services and jobs from tax cuts.

In the first of what probably will be many protests over actual or anticipated cuts in the state budget, advocates for the poor, education groups and labor unions gathered at the Statehouse to urge the governor and legislators to consider increasing taxes to help close a projected \$8 billion shortfall.

Although they avoided the word 'taxes,' advocates called for 'a balanced approach' to deal with the state budget crisis.

"Cuts alone will only exacerbate the problems Ohioans already face," said Col Owens, senior attorney with Legal Aid of Southwest Ohio.

His remarks came at a news conference to announce the formation of One Ohio Now, a coalition of more than 30 organizations pushing for a state tax hike.

Gov. John Kasich and many Republican legislators have vowed that they will not raise taxes to help close the budget shortfall.

One Ohio Now organizers say they believe that once state leaders and the public understand the magnitude of reductions that will be necessary, they might be more open to other options.

"In time, many people - we think a majority of people - will come to realize that doing this with cuts alone" will cause more problems than it solves, Owens said.

He and others said they fear massive cuts in state aid to schools, police and fire protection, libraries, Medicaid, job training and other safety-net services at a time when unemployment is pushing up demand.

Zach Schiller of Policy Matters Ohio, a Cleveland research group, said budget cuts not only hurt those who lose services or such benefits as health care, but they also cost jobs.

Outside the Statehouse, a crowd of about 300 chanted and waved signs as several speakers talked about protecting state-funded services and jobs.

Bundled against the cold wind, Lolita Thomas, with Local 4501 of the Communications Workers of America, said she's worried about additional job losses and wants state leaders to be mindful of the actions they take and how it will affect Ohioans.

"We just want anything that happens to be equitable," she said.

Kasich must release his proposed state budget by March 15, and he has repeatedly vowed during the campaign and since taking office Monday that it will not include tax increases.

Rep. Ron Amstutz, chairman of the House Finance Committee, which will review the budget before it moves on to the Senate, said yesterday that all ideas are welcome but it's difficult to predict what will happen before the governor's proposal is unveiled.

"Everything we consider is going to be hard," said Amstutz, a Republican from Wooster.

Advocates said they are not promoting any specific tax or combination of taxes; rather, they want additional revenue to be generated to avoid deep cuts in critical services.

Barbara Shaner, associate executive director of the Ohio Association of School Business Officials, said "there needs to be a discussion beyond cuts only."

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