

## Budget woes may worsen, officials warn

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Budget woes may worsen, officials warn  
Providers of social services told not to expect new funding

By Larry Carson

Sun reporter

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Despite the return of Maryland's so-called structural deficit, several members of Howard County's State House delegation have warned social services providers not to look for revenues to grow next year.

"I don't see me going back down there [Annapolis] and raising more taxes," said state Sen. James N. Robey, who said he supported tax increases and spending cuts last year that were designed to eliminate the \$1.7 billion state budget shortfall.

Robey's comments came Wednesday at a luncheon in Oakland Mills organized by the Association of Community Services, an umbrella group of county human services groups.

The senator was preceded by Neil L. Bergsman, a former state budget director who is director of the nonpartisan Maryland Budget and Tax Policy Institute, a think tank that studies how state policy affects low-income and vulnerable people.

In his presentation, Bergsman said that despite legislative action last year, the state is on track to spend more than it takes in for the next several fiscal years. Things could get even worse if voters reject slot machines in November's ballot referendum.

"'Mission Accomplished' are dangerous words," he said, referring both to President Bush's aircraft carrier speech not long after the Iraq invasion, and to the general feeling after last November's General Assembly special session intended to eliminate the deficit.

"What I'm telling you is that we haven't fixed this budget," he said.

Robey, along with Dels. Guy Guzzone and Shane Pendergrass, all District 13 Democrats, answered questions from county human services groups worried about funding for resident they serve. The group invited all 11 county legislators to the annual event.

Robey said he expects state budget strains to worsen, driven by rising fuel and food costs, while agencies such as social services struggle to pay salaries high enough to keep talented employees.

Guzzone sounded more hopeful, suggesting that Gov. Martin O'Malley, a Democrat, and other state officials can find a way to muddle through.

"I don't think there's any appetite for increasing taxes in the near future," he told the crowd of about 50 people.

Pendergrass, who specializes in health issues, told the audience she helped dodge spending reductions throughout the previous gubernatorial administration.

"You didn't see the cuts proposed over the last four years," she said, referring to the tenure of former Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., a Republican.

Despite the difficult times, Guzzone noted that gains were made in health care. The General Assembly approved allowing children up to age 25 to remain on their parents' policies, adding 100,000 uninsured low-income residents to state Medicaid, and improving treatment reimbursements.

But Robey said next year will likely be a year of retrenchment.

"It may be in the next session that the best we can accomplish is to hold on to what we've got," he said.

Rene Buckman, president of the ACS board, said the group invited the officials to help members become more informed and able to support nonprofits before the General Assembly.

"We always are mindful of the downfalls - the situations our members are faced with," Buckman said. "We want to educate them."