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Deep cuts, deep effects

By Joseph Sabino Mistick

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As long as they are talking about numbers and not people in Harrisburg, balancing the state budget is pretty easy. In the end, all you want to show is that the spending will match the revenue -- on paper -- come the end of the budget year.

Gov. Ed Rendell took a strong swipe at the fiscal dilemma. Rendell's proposals would reduce spending by more than \$1 billion.

And with the passage of Senate Bill 850, the Republicans proposed another \$1.7 billion in spending cuts. That bill died in committee in the Democrat-controlled House and the legislative wrangling continues.

Even that spending plan, as proposed by the Republicans, was \$900 million out of balance by the time it passed in the Senate because our fiscal ship is sinking like a rock.

And it gets worse every day as increasing numbers of average Pennsylvanians seek state-funded assistance to protect them from the ravages of the recession. Still, you can balance any budget -- on paper.

In the 1970 Pearl Harbor film "Tora! Tora! Tora!," after Admiral Husband E. Kimmel reviews a proposed battle plan, he expresses the frustration that every decision-maker faces when abstract proposals clash with reality.

"It looks good on paper, but for God's sake ... that's not a paper fleet out there," Kimmel says.

And so it is in Pennsylvania.

The programs that will be eliminated or severely cut are not paper programs. The problems facing families are not paper problems. And the citizens who will be denied the help they desperately need are not paper citizens.

And if SB 850 is a harbinger of what the Republicans will demand in this budget, the real impact of their position, and not just how it looks on paper, must be considered.

Here are just a few examples:

- Attendant care services would be cut by \$22.5 million. This means that your elderly parent, suffering from Alzheimer's, might not receive that one day of day care that allows you to run to the grocery.
- Scholarship assistance would be cut by \$71 million. Young Pennsylvanians, worthy and promising, will no longer find the help they need to stay in college.
- Education funding would be cut by more than \$1 billion. This means that local real estate taxes will increase to cover the fixed costs of public schools. Seniors, on fixed incomes, will be hit the hardest.
- Pre-K and Head Start programs, proven winners, would be cut by \$71.5 million, dooming our youngest citizens from the get-go.
- Aid to parochial and private schools would be cut by \$13.5 million and the Education Improvement Tax Credit program, which allows companies to contribute to these schools, would be cut by \$40 million. This means that tuition will increase to cover the services that would be lost by these cuts.
- Economic development programs would be cut by \$200 million, passing many costs to local governments and slowing or stopping progress. And the Ben Franklin Technology Development Program would be cut by \$20 million, crushing those start-ups that guarantee our future.

In the end, any cuts will depend on whose ox is being gored. Even some House Republicans, who supported SB 850 in committee, were seen wearing "Save the Scotland School" buttons around the Capitol. And that was one of the programs their votes would have eliminated.

We can cut and slash our way out of this fiscal mess -- on paper. But confronting reality begs this question:

What kind of place do we want Pennsylvania to be?

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