

## Cuts must be made, but Rendell hasn't abandoned initiatives

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Applause normally punctuates a governor's annual budget address.

Not this year.

With the elimination of two longtime state-funded schools -- the Scotland School for Veterans' Children and the Scranton School for the Deaf -- along with the popular Governor's Schools of Excellence, a summer program for gifted students, there was not a lot to cheer about.

The governor underscored the unprecedented need for budget cuts throughout his address yesterday while unveiling his \$29 billion spending plan. He did not repeat his 'no whining' line, but he clearly told state residents that times are tough and everyone is going to feel the pain.

"The dam has broken," he said in a conference call later in the day yesterday. "Anything that can reduce costs has to be looked at."

Rendell is not calling for an overall tax increase but many residents will be impacted by this spending plan.

Already the partisan lines have been drawn with Republicans complaining the budget calls for too much new spending. "This is not the year to fund new programs or new spending," said House Minority Leader Sam Smith.

Indeed it is the type of budget year when it would be easy for a governor to slash costs and then crawl under a rock to wait out the recession. But Rendell is looking at new initiatives.

He is talking about creating a new agency -- the Department of Aging and Long Term Living -- that he says will improve the efficiency of services for older adults. Statistics show that by the year 2020, one in every four Pennsylvanians will be age 60 or older.

He wants to create a Tuition Relief Act for students going to state-owned or community colleges whose family incomes qualify. He also wants to fund his adult Basic Health Insurance Program that he says would provide health insurance to 90,000 people by the end of 2009-10. There also is his idea of expanding video poker in the state, which is something that needs further study and is sure to be a lightning rod during negotiations.

But it is too soon to dismiss any of these ideas out of hand.

We are not saying there should not be hard questions asked about the budget plan and alternative ideas discussed. But given the rough waters numerous Pennsylvanians are treading, many ideas are worth exploring.

Just as with the federal government, now is not the time for partisan bickering to take over the General Assembly. The saying that people rise to the occasion has never been more important for our lawmakers. Voters are expecting much better from them this year. They want to see a sense that elected officials understand what people are going through and want to come up with the best solution -- no matter where it originates.

We also hope legislators will take Pennsylvania off the list as the last hold out in the nation that does not tax chewing tobacco and cigars. This is an idea that, as we have said, will not only bring in much needed revenue but also might act as a deterrent for those who smoke cigars and use so-called 'smokeless tobacco'.

It also seems like a good time to look at local government consolidation on two fronts. One is with smaller municipalities that, in growing numbers, are deciding to shift the cost of their police protection to the state by asking the state police to take over that function.

While we understand why this is an attractive option during tough budget times, it just adds to the costs elsewhere. Regional police forces are the answer. As advocates of smarter government spending, we also agree with the governor that school district consolidation should be studied.

This is a challenging time but it also can be a time for exploring new -- or old -- ideas, including bipartisanship.