



Lawmakers, Advocates Navigate Around Virus Concerns at Budget Hearing

By: David Cruz, March 12, 2020

To view video, please visit: <https://www.njtvonline.org/news/video/lawmakers-advocates-navigate-around-virus-concerns-at-budget-hearing/>

A state Senate panel held a second public hearing on the state budget Thursday. While some time went to discussing coronavirus precautions for future stops along the way to developing Trenton's spending plan for the coming year, it was mostly business as usual.

Representatives from a variety of nonprofits, school districts and business interests came to the campus of Rowan University in Glassboro to make their case before the Budget and Appropriations Committee, chaired by Sen. Paul Sarlo, the Bergen County Democrat.

"I'm just going to ask everybody to be mindful of each other," Sarlo said, as attendees who crowded into meeting room were asked to spread out. "Give everybody space. Give everybody the distance. It's OK to be a little socially awkward. I get it."

Senate President Steve Sweeney surprised some by suggesting tougher precautions might be coming in the future. The South Jersey Democrat was asked whether he was considering using Skype or similar teleconferencing tools.

"Yeah, well that's what we're looking to see if we can actually do that," he said. "This budget committee meeting was too soon, but, going forward, like we have a bunch of committees next week, trying to be in a position where we can do it by Skype. We're actually looking at that now."

Front and center at the hearing were education advocates from the southern part of the state, where the funding plan for schools announced in Gov. Phil Murphy's budget message to the Legislature last month got a less than warm reception.

"The \$491 million proposed budget is a long way from the \$2.1 billion New Jersey students should receive," said Julie Borst, executive director of Save Our Schools NJ. "The cumulative effect of chronic and severe underfunding are still evident in the condition of many of our school buildings, lack of staff capacity and limited programming choices. The lack of funding in the state created deep inequities between school districts."

Also present was Jennifer Howe, a member of the school board in Toms River, which has fought a long battle with Trenton over the level of financial support they get from the state.

“We have been fighting, along with our students for years now, that someone will hear us, someone will show us the formula, and explain how we’re supposed to give our kids a thorough and efficient education when our budget keeps getting slashed,” she said.

“How will this change our community?” said Toms River resident Dana Dentato. “Bored kids will always find something to do and I doubt it will always be productive and safe.”

Critics of the governor’s proposed \$1.65 per pack boost in the cigarette tax also got their shot, maintaining the projected revenue was likely illusory.

“Bottom line, my members think this is nuts,” said Sal Risalvato, executive director of the New Jersey Gasoline, Convenience, Automotive Association. “And here’s why it’s nuts. We’re going to lose a tremendous amount of revenue into the state of New Jersey if we increase the tax. We’re not going to realize any increase in revenue because of that tax increase. We have been selling for a long time, a lot of our volume of cigarettes to New York and New York is going to stop buying them from us.”

Sarlo asked those who had finished testifying to leave the room afterwards in order to maintain some social distancing, which health experts said is a key to avoid spreading the novel coronavirus.

Budget committees for both houses of the legislature have hearings scheduled through June, but there’s still some question as to whether anybody will be at those hearings to testify in person.

Under state law, a budget must be in place by the start of the 2021 fiscal year on July 1.