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Mercury News editorial: Message to GOP, Brown: Go back to the table and make a deal

Mercury News Editorial

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Gov. Jerry Brown has signed \$11 billion in cuts to the state budget, which translates to less medical care for the poor, elderly and disabled, shrinking opportunities for higher education and reduced access to child care and preschool. But if Republican lawmakers fail to agree to put Brown's proposed tax extensions on the ballot, the fallout could turn from awful to catastrophic. One new report says the resulting all-cuts budget could strip more than a quarter of a billion dollars from schools in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties alone.

That simply can't happen.

Sen. Sam Blakeslee says he agrees. He's the Republican who represents the 15th District, that skinny stretch from San Jose to San Luis Obispo, and one of the "GOP 5" lawmakers who have bucked their party to negotiate with Brown.

Blakeslee says he doesn't understand why there hasn't yet been a deal. Brown says Republicans are asking for the moon. All we know for sure is that without an agreement, even if the economy improves, truly devastating cuts in spending will be unavoidable.

To find out just how devastating, we talked to folks who manage public-agency budgets in Blakeslee's district. Lawmakers like Blakeslee -- and the governor -- will have to answer to their constituents if they don't prevent disasters like these:

- Without the tax extensions, Morgan Hill Unified School District will have to cut \$7.5 million next year, according to deputy superintendent Bonnie Tognazzini, on top of \$11 million in cuts over the previous three years. That means, among other things, that K-3 class sizes would probably grow beyond

30 students. (That's right, even kindergarten. Just imagine all those 5-year-olds.) And kids getting too little attention as a consequence would fall even further behind because of additional furlough days. "It's unfathomable," Tognazzini said. The district already has eliminated a third of its maintenance staff, cut teacher positions, instituted some furlough days and increased class sizes. There is no profligacy here, no waste and abuse to target. More cuts would seriously damage the future of the 9,000 kids the district serves.

- Santa Clara County gets nearly a third of its revenue from the state, so its budget picture always remains murky until a state budget passes. But if the tax extensions are not passed, the government service that is most people's top priority -- public safety -- is all but certain to take a hit. That's because one tax the governor wants to extend, a temporary increase in the vehicle license fee, directly funds public safety services. It now provides \$18.7 million to Santa Clara County, according to deputy county executive Leslie Crowell. Losing it would jeopardize high-tech theft prosecutions, drug treatment for inmates and the prosecution of child abusers, among other things, Crowell said. The biggest chunk, \$12.3 million, is for the probation department, meaning felons would get less supervision as they move back into society.
- At Cabrillo College in Aptos, more than 400 class sections already have been cut, according to Vice President Victoria Lewis. Next year's estimated deficit, \$7.2 million on a \$59 million budget, can be partly



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cushioned with reserves -- but without the tax extensions, the deficit would jump to \$10.5 million. Entire degree programs could be eliminated and more classes will be cut. All this will further limit access for both young people and adults trying to improve their skills -- even as the region's companies go begging for well-educated, highly skilled workers. "This inhibits (students') ability to advance in the world," Lewis said. She had a pointed question for Blakeslee: "Is (returning to) the reduced tax rate so important that he's willing to deny access to hundreds of thousands of community college students?" Blakeslee says he doesn't want any of the damaging cuts to take place: "Oh no, of course not. No. ... I'm one of the few that's been willing to work with the governor to see if a compromise for a special election is possible," he told us, adding that he wants pension and spending reforms on the ballot alongside the tax extensions -- reasonable demands, depending on the details. Blakeslee, the rest of the GOP 5 and Brown can prevent felons from going unsupervised and kids from being packed into classrooms like sardines: Get back to the table and make a deal to reform pensions and put the tax extensions on the ballot. The alternative is, as Tognazzini said, unfathomable.



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