

Low funds force trims

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Gov. Chris Gregoire, swinging into her re-election bid, is defending \$15 million in cuts she made to the budget.

"Every one of the vetoes, if you look at it, if I had money, I'd pay for it. Goes without saying," she said Thursday.

She said a faltering national economy and lowered expectations for state tax income were among the reasons for the vetoes.

"I didn't want to start new programs or enhance programs or hire staff only, literally within months, to find we were going to cut," she told The Olympian's editorial board Thursday.

She did start and enhance many programs in a \$329 million supplemental budget, such as adding \$62.4 million to teacher pay raises and spending \$6.2 million on a computer to run an as-yet-unfunded family-leave program.

People whose programs were affected by the vetoes were left to scratch their heads.

They include representatives of the Washington Information Network 2-1-1, which operates call centers to help residents find services, such as during the floods along the Chehalis River in December. Gregoire vetoed a \$750,000 boost to the program.

Pam Toal, chairwoman of United Way of Thurston County, called it "especially disappointing because this comes at a time when the 2-1-1 system is responding to increasing numbers of calls from Washingtonians looking for critical services in an economic downturn."

Foster care advocates also are frustrated by \$3 million worth of vetoes to new programs.

"I don't know if I can sustain it next session. It's good to have, good to do, but I don't know whether we'll have the money and therefore sustain it," Gregoire said.

She noted she has boosted the state's 10,000-child foster care program since taking office in 2005, including leaving \$35 million in new spending in the latest budget.

She rejected the notion that the items she trimmed are required by a lawsuit settlement over the foster care system that requires the state to improve.

One of the lawyers representing foster children in the case disagrees.

Casey Trupin of Columbia Legal Services said the cut programs included school-based foster care recruitment and educational advocates, both important to helping foster children do better in school.

"Overall, we thought the Legislature put together a really strong budget for foster kids," he said. "They did a great job of addressing some of the critical areas of need ... but we're disappointed the governor weakened it."

Gregoire's vetoes were criticized by Republican Dino Rossi, who fell 133 votes shy of defeating her in 2004 and is running for governor again this year.

"By refusing to say 'no' to more spending, the incumbent is saying 'yes' to a huge tax increase, if she is re-elected," Rossi said this week.

Gregoire plans to board her campaign bus Monday and is ready for a rematch. She brought up Rossi's work as a state senator and budget writer during a crunch in 2003.

"It's nice and interesting to say, 'You've spent too much' and all of that. But where would you cut? Tell me, where you would cut? And if I had evidence in where he would cut, it would be children's health care. It would be COLAS for teachers. It would be (smaller) class sizes for kids. Those are not things that should be cut," Gregoire said.