

NEWS

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Supervisors band together to protect local services

SACRAMENTO – Members of the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors took their fight for a responsible state budget to the capital Thursday, participating in a historic joint meeting with supervisors from other Southern California counties to protest proposals that would cripple services to county residents who need help now more than ever.

The state has floated a plan to withhold \$3.3 billion over seven months intended to fund state- and federally mandated welfare and health programs as well as vital transportation projects to address the state budget deficit and leave it up to counties to come up with the money to support needy Californians.

Counties, however, don't have a funding stream to provide this aid and would have to tap reserves and contingencies and take dollars from other services to county residents to meet this obligation. This would drive most if not all of the state's 58 counties, including San Bernardino County, to insolvency. San Bernardino County alone would have to scratch together about \$200 million to make those services whole.

"We can't take on the responsibilities of the state. ... It is important to us for you to keep your financial house in order," San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors Chairman Gary C. Ovitt told the several state legislators who attended the meeting.

Ovitt was joined in Sacramento by fellow San Bernardino County supervisors Paul Biane and Josie Gonzales, who also spoke of the need for state leaders to work together to solve the state's fiscal crisis and not shift problems to counties.

The state's approach has been particularly frustrating to San Bernardino County, which made significant sacrifices during the state's economic boom to prepare itself for the eventual bust.

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More than two years ago, at the very first sign of a downturn in the housing market, the County of San Bernardino began freezing hiring and tightly controlling expenses. When the recession hit, the county had built a bank of about 200 vacant positions that could be cut in order to avoid laying off county workers and adding to the region's growing unemployment rate.

On Tuesday, the Board of Supervisors approved plans to reduce county work hours and create early-retirement incentives. The county is also requiring departments to cut their budgets by 8 percent and absorb the costs of employee pay increases.

Also on Tuesday, the County of San Bernardino joined a growing list of counties taking legal action against the state. The Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to sue state Controller John Chiang to force him to release funds appropriated by the Legislature to provide welfare payments to about 93,000 of San Bernardino County's poorest residents.

Chiang is opting to withhold these funds to help the state cope with its cash shortage. The County of San Bernardino contends the controller doesn't have the legal authority to not release funding appropriated by the Legislature.