

Legislators angling to avert layoffs

Advance Albany Bureau

ALBANY — State legislators are eyeing several plans to avert at least some of the 8,400 layoffs planned in Gov. Mario M. Cuomo's proposed \$31.5 billion budget.

Aides to Senate Finance Committee Chairman John J. Marchi, R-Ward Hill, said Senate Republicans are considering a plan that would ask state employees to temporarily give up negotiated raises to generate money to save jobs.

"It's something that is under consideration," said Marchi spokesman Gerald McLaughlin.

The proposal and other suggested changes in Cuomo's budget are expected to come forward this week as the Republicans in the Senate begin to discuss the spending plan at their weekly conference.

Meanwhile, Assembly Speaker Stanley Fink, D-Brooklyn, said that he hasn't given up on restoring positions to the budget despite his decision last week "to take off the table" a plan by union leaders and some Assembly Democrats for a temporary hike in the income tax.

"Obviously, it is more difficult," said Fink of efforts to find money to avert layoffs without a hike in the three major taxes — sales, income or franchise. Fink said he became convinced that Cuomo was "sincere" in his conviction that a hike in any one of the three major taxes would be counterproductive to the state's economy.

But Fink said there might be a way to redesignate certain Cuomo allocations and hike some of the nuisance and sin taxes and fees beyond the \$900 million already proposed by Cuomo to generate the money. And Senate Republicans say that the Cuomo budget appears to underestimate revenues by at least \$200 million — a charge denied by the governor.

A top priority, Fink said, will be a restoration of jobs that would have a direct effect on the state's delivery of service to the most needy.

The chairmen of the two legislative committees on mental health, Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly, D-West Brighton, and Sen. Frank Padavan, R-Queens, have already said cuts in mental health and mental retardation programs will have a detrimental effect on services to those with the most profound needs.

In fact, Mrs. Connelly suggests that the cutbacks may cost the state more in the long run because of law suits she feels are certain to result from the types of cuts proposed by Cuomo.

Among the institutions hit hardest by the planned layoffs are Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook, and South Beach Psychiatric Center, Ocean Breeze.

Meanwhile, Marchi said lawmakers are sympathetic to the proposal by the City University of New York to avert most of its 1,000 layoffs by cutting maintenance, repair and other non-personnel costs instead.

The university claims that the layoffs would have to occur in areas that have the most student demand — computer science, business and engineering, instead of courses with declining enrollments.

That is because, they say, the university is mandated to fire non-tenured faculty first and they tend to be the most recently hired. Almost all the non-tenured faculty, according to College of Staten Island President Edmond Volpe, are teaching in the computer, business and engineering fields.

Marchi, however, did not say whether the Legislature would approve a \$12 million additional appropriation to the City University system — which is also a cornerstone of the university's request to the Legislature.

The university's tenure requirements, some legislative aides say, provide an effective lobbying position, but also shield the college from making what they believe are needed economies.

Senate Minority Leader Manfred Ohrenstein, D-Manhattan, said he hopes the Legislature can find the funds to avert virtually all the layoffs.

Under a Democratic plan, the state would move to cut the same number of employees — 14,000 — from the 180,000 state payroll as proposed by Cuomo. But instead of cutting that number in one year, it would be done in two years — all with attrition.

—BRUCE ALPERT