

# State workers waiting to be pink-slipped

Thousands may lose jobs temporarily if budget is late

By JESSICA ANCKER  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

ALBANY — Thousands of state workers expected to find out today if they may lose their jobs April 1.

Gov. George Pataki has never confirmed widespread reports that he's considering firing thousands of state workers if the Legislature does not pass the state budget on time, then rehiring all or most of them when the budget is in place.

However, if Pataki does want layoffs to take place on April 1, the beginning of the state's fiscal year, he would have to distribute pink slips today in order to meet the 20-day notice period set by civil service law.

Officials at some state agencies told the Times Union of Albany last week they were preparing for the layoffs, either telling workers they might be fired or making up lists of non-essential workers.

But yesterday, officials said they didn't know if the governor was going to go through with the plan.

"We have no information as to whether it's going to happen or not," said David Flanagan, spokesman for the state Board of Elections, who last week said lay-off notices would be sent out to his department's staff today.

"We have not sent out any pink slips and there are no plans to do so," said Christopher Carpenter, an Education Department spokesman.

*Deep state and city funding cuts could turn back the clock on mental health programs on Island. See Page A 13.*

Assemblyman John McEneny, an Albany Democrat whose district contains thousands of state employees, believes the governor had been going ahead with the plan but pulled back late Friday afternoon.

If that's true, it might be because the governor has come to an understanding of how tangled state civil service law is, said Danny Donohue, president of the Civil Service Employees Association.

For example, thousands of workers could escape layoffs through their right to move into a position they used to hold, "bumping" an employee lower down in the pecking order. That means the governor might not be able to control which state workers he wants to lay off, Donohue said.

Also, if Pataki wanted workers to come back after the temporary layoffs, he'd have to rehire based on seniority, not on which positions he wants to fill, Donohue pointed out.

Pataki spokesman Robert Bellafiore refused to comment yesterday beyond saying that the governor's staff was still working with the budget office to come up with a contingency plan if the budget is not passed.

At least one department is safe, for the time being.

"Pink slips are not going out at the Health Department," spokeswoman Lois Uttley said. The Health Department runs several medical and nursing centers, where state workers are directly responsible for caring for the patients.

McEneny and two Democratic colleagues, Assemblymen Paul Tonko and Ron Canestrari, said they would file a bill today to try to prevent the layoffs. The bill would protect state workers from being forced to take unpaid furloughs when the state budget is late.

Meanwhile, state workers are worrying.

"Everybody's holding their breath," Donohue said. "We don't know what's happening, and frankly, I don't think the administration knows what's happening."