

Oklahoma Gov. Brad Henry warns lawmakers to be precise with budget cuts

BY MICHAEL MCNUTT - Capitol Bureau Comments  2
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As legislators tackle Oklahoma's worst budget crisis in modern history, they must "wield the budget knife carefully with clinical precision," Gov. Brad Henry said today.

"We cannot balance the budget at the expense of the most vulnerable among us," Henry said to members of the House and Senate, kicking off a session that will run through late May.

Making his last scheduled address to both chambers of the Republican-led Legislature, the Democratic governor, according to a final draft of his speech, reminded lawmakers that Oklahomans daily depend on state agencies: Teachers instruct children, road crews maintain highways — and keep them clear of snow and ice during winter storms such as the one that struck the state last week — and state troopers and correctional officers keep the state safe.

"As we respond to this fiscal storm, we must keep the needs of these hardworking Oklahomans at the forefront," Henry said. "At no time is that more urgent than now, during economic distress, when people increasingly must turn to us for help."

Henry, who is serving his eighth and last year as governor, said the "economic storm that has seized our nation has also battered Oklahoma."

Revenues for the state have come in 25.6 percent below estimates for the first six months of this fiscal year, which started July 1.

Estimates call for legislators to have about \$1.3 billion less to appropriate this year compared to last year. Available money in the state's savings account and remaining federal stimulus funds will help deal with the deficit, but cuts still will be needed to approve a balanced budget as required by the state's constitution.

Henry told legislators about his first year in office in 2003, when most of the lawmakers listening weren't serving at the state Capitol, and how he and legislators came together to deal with a \$700 million shortfall with little money in reserves.

"Together, we made hard choices, weathered the storm and emerged even stronger," Henry said.

Henry asked legislators to work together and leave out political rhetoric — especially in this election year.

"Slashing government spending can make for catchy campaign rhetoric, but rhetoric has ramifications — human ramifications — that demand to be considered," the governor said.

Henry asked lawmakers to find money to pay for the increasing costs of the state's Insure Oklahoma program, which provides subsidized health insurance premiums for eligible small businesses and individuals. He also asked them to find a revenue source for a fund that provides money for research projects.

The governor also asked lawmakers for money to continue and increase drug courts and mental health courts, intended for low-risk offenders.

"These programs are having dramatic results," Henry said. "We can save lives today and taxpayer dollars tomorrow."

Henry encouraged lawmakers to continue progress in education and teacher pay.

"I will not tolerate any effort to cut teacher pay or siphon resources from our classrooms, our students or our future," the governor said.

He complimented state schools Superintendent Sandy Garrett and his education adviser, former Tulsa Mayor Kathy Taylor, for applying for federal funds that would pay for reforms such as performance pay for teachers and a data system to track the success of students. Republican lawmakers have supported similar ideas.

Henry also said lawmakers should continue early childhood education efforts.

"We cannot undermine those efforts and jeopardize the future of our youngest Oklahomans," he said.

Because it was his last State of the State address, Henry also reminisced about accomplishments during his administration. They included working with legislators to move families with young children out of the Tar Creek Superfund site, reducing tobacco use among teens, replacing junk food in public schools, attacking the use of methamphetamines and building diabetes and cancer research centers to give Oklahomans better access to quality health care.