

## Hearings on N.J. budget planned

Written by

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New Jersey lawmakers start their budget review process this week.

Budget committees in the Senate and the Assembly will hold public hearings on Gov. Chris Christie's proposed \$29.4 billion budget, which cuts spending by 2.6 percent over last year and calls for heftier contributions from state workers for pension and health care benefits.

It also incorporates \$200 million in tax cuts for businesses and adds \$250 million more than last year for public schools.

The first hearing will be today, when the Senate's budget and appropriations panel meets at Bergen County College in Paramus. The Assembly's budget committee convenes the next day in the State House annex for a session that will focus on health, human services, senior, family and children's issues.

Both panels will hold additional hearings later this month at sites throughout the state.

People wishing to speak at the hearings should register at the legislature's website

or call the legislative budget and finance office. Those planning to present written testimony to either panel are asked to bring 20 copies.

Analysts expect a bruising battle over the budget, unlike last year's process.

Christie and Republicans lawmakers have criticized the financial priorities of Democrats, who control both houses of the legislature. They also question why the legislature has been "slow to act" on many of the so-called tool kit measures proposed by Christie to help municipalities meet the 2 percent cap on local spending and property tax growth that took effect in January.

"The state needs hard-nosed responsible budgeting, including pension and health benefits reform that brings our obligations in line with the taxpayers' ability to pay," said Anthony Bucco, the GOP's senate budget officer. "We must continue to tighten our belt and make sacrifices. During the upcoming budget negotiations every

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possible cent of discretionary spending must be deleted from the budget."

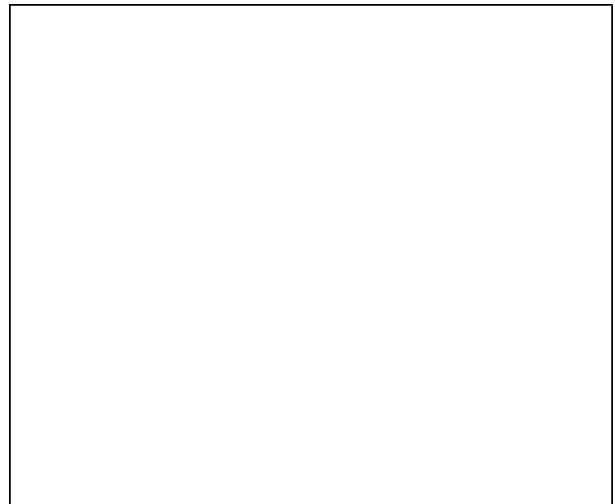
Democrats claim Christie's budget plans will pit middle-class taxpayers against each other.

"The governor's budget proposal is the same-old-same-old," said Louis D. Greenwald, D-Camden, who chairs the Assembly budget committee. "It puts the heaviest property tax burden on working class New Jerseyans and continues his assault on women's health care. That's why it's more important than ever for everyone to provide potential solutions that ensure true shared sacrifice."

Besides Tuesday's session, the Assembly's budget panel plans to hold a March 16 hearing at Montclair State University that will focus on education, higher education and local government issues. And a March 23 session at Camden County College's Blackwood campus will focus mostly on public safety, economic development, transportation, environment, arts, history and cultural issues.

The Senate budget panel also plans a March 15 at Camden County College, though details of that session haven't been finalized.

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