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## Massive cuts weigh on governor

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**BY JOE HALLETT**

When Gov. Ted Strickland arrived home from work the other night, his wife, Frances, relayed a message from his cousin Dave.



A retired schoolteacher, Dave, 62, had called with a request. He and some pals were playing golf and got to talking about another passion: fishing.

It didn't seem fair, Dave and his friends concluded, that any Ohioan 62 or older should have to pay the \$19 fee for a fishing license.

Dave called the governor's residence from the golf course to lodge the complaint. Frances promised to tell her husband.

When she did, Strickland, a former Methodist minister, swallowed a few choice words teetering on the tip of his tongue. These are not the happiest of times for the governor. It seems everyone -- Senate Republicans, lobbyists, the press, even librarians -- is dumping on him.

Cutting \$2 billion in spending last year was not a joyful exercise. And now, with tax revenue still tanking, Strickland is proposing \$2.4 billion more in cuts as part of his plan to fill a \$3.2 billion hole in the two-year budget that was due July 1.

Behind each dollar cut is a face. Those faces include poor children who will not receive health services and preschool education, alcohol and drug addicts who won't be treated, people with mental illnesses forced to fend for themselves, hungry Ohioans turned away by closed signs at food pantries, bookworms peering into shuttered libraries and elderly shut-ins waiting -- and waiting -- for visits from home caregivers.

Compounding Strickland's burden from reducing or axing those services is the specter of Statehouse protests by his strongest allies, government employee unions. State workers are angry that Strickland has reduced their ranks with job cuts, pushed them to take two-week unpaid furloughs and now proposes cutting by 5 percent the state's contribution to their pensions.

Several weeks ago, according to a member of the governor's inner circle, Strickland and his top

advisers sat at the round table in his office and contemplated what else to cut to meet the constitutional requirement for a balanced budget. A natural target was the expensive Medicaid program.

Reductions in various services were discussed, but when someone mentioned a program supplying oxygen tanks to elderly people with breathing problems, Strickland said, "Enough!"

It was at that point, the official said, when Strickland determined that more revenue had to be raised, and he decided to break his promise not to permit slot machines at Ohio's seven horseracing tracks. (There is evidence, though, that the administration was mulling the slots option well before then).

"There are several reasons why I chose this route," Strickland explained last week. The tracks "are places where gambling already occurs; they are discreet locations; this proposal will not result in the proliferation of gambling outside of these discreet seven locations. They are adult-appropriate venues, and they will bring us the quickest income in terms of the licensing fees that we will receive rather quickly."

Strickland estimated the slots would yield \$933 million over two years. Senate President Bill M. Harris and other Republicans doubted that number and legitimately held hearings late last week to force the administration to justify it and answer other questions about the racetrack slots. In a tit-for-tat political maneuver, House Democrats responded with hearings to highlight the devastating impact of further cuts if the slots plan fails.

When he ran for governor, Strickland accepted responsibility for the well-being of 11 million Ohioans. Now, in the post-Depression era's worst economic time, it weighs on him. Getting home at night might be a respite from it all.

And then cousin Dave calls from the golf course to complain that he and his buddies shouldn't have to pay for fishing licenses.

"I love Dave," Strickland told Frances, "but Dave just doesn't get it."

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