

A shaky budget sleight of hand

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The \$51 billion state budget just framed by Gov. Ted Strickland and his fellow Statehouse Democrats is a timed-release disaster for Ohio and Ohioans. The one remaining question is when, not if, Strickland will have to order General Assembly Democrats back to Columbus for a rewrite.

The 24-month spending package is taped with ribbons of sand, such as bookkeeping maneuvers and \$933 million that Strickland, grossly optimistic, says Ohio will realize from his edict legalizing racetrack slot machines. Strickland's triumph, in some of his fellow Democrats' eyes, is that neither he nor House Democrats asked Ohioans to pay higher taxes -- except the taxes called "fees" or taxes on the poor called "gambling."

The budget they've crafted also is set atop the shaky foundation of billions of dollars in one-time federal stimulus money.

Yet even for all *that*, school districts will, on average, see a 0.24 percent state-aid decrease this year -- that's one-quarter of 1 percent -- and an equivalent drop next year, though the prices of educational supplies are rising 6.7 percent a year, according to federal data.

And as The Plain Dealer's Columbus bureau reported, while the budget orders schools to use an "evidence-based" teaching theory Strickland has embraced, "most elements are phased in and the plan wouldn't be fully funded for a dozen years."

For all *that*, state-aided colleges and universities will lose \$170 million; their students may face annual tuition increases up to 3.5 percent.

And for *that*, public libraries, and their 8 million cardholders, will lose \$84 million (though that's less than the \$227 million Strickland wanted to bludgeon from them).

For *that*, according to Sen. Timothy Grendell, a Republican from Chester Township, the budget hacks \$59 million from state "auxiliary services," such as aid for pupils enrolled in parochial schools, another blow at school choice by a Democratic administration that loathes it.

For *that*, scandalously scarce Ohio services for the mentally ill or addicted will become even scantier.

For *that*, hospitals, among them some of Greater Cleveland's crown jewels, will pay a new franchise fee they say will cost \$145 million a year.

And for *that*, fewer older Ohioans will be able to receive in-home care, which AARP Ohio has said will force more Ohioans into (politically preferred) nursing-home care.

Strickland on Monday referred to "this bipartisan budget." It's not. It required 50 House votes on Monday; it got 54 -- with all 53 House Democrats voting "yes." It required 17 Senate votes; it got 17 -- because all 12 Senate Democrats and five (of 20) Republicans voted "yes."

Those roll calls suggest the budget is the re-election platform Strickland wanted. Based on its math and its choices, he may soon be sorry he did.

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