

## Doing less with less in Baton Rouge: John Maginnis

**John Maginnis**

The enhanced security isn't all that is tight around the state Capitol these days. Convening lawmakers find

themselves in quite a bind over rapidly deteriorating finances.

Two years ago, this mostly new Legislature and new governor set out to change Louisiana. Instead, they have been scrambling to get ahead of the changes coming at them faster than they imagined.

They knew there was a fiscal cliff to prepare for on the road ahead, but they weren't ready for the large cracks opening in the earth just before them, in the form of a quarter-billion-dollar or more revenue shortfall to be made up before June 30.

At this late date, the only responsible way to deal with the current-year deficit is to go back to the so-called

rainy day fund for up to \$172 million that is available to be drawn out. The two-thirds threshold will be difficult to reach in the more conservative House, but this mid-year instability is just what the officially named Budget Stabilization Fund is meant to address.

The budget is always the big issue, but this year it is sucking up all the oxygen that would fuel battles between special interests: business versus labor, insurers versus trial lawyers, shippers versus river pilots,

physicians versus psychologists, phone companies versus cable. All sides would spend plenty of money hiring lobbyists and courting legislators. They were spectacles to behold.

Some such controversies may yet erupt -- the contract lobbyists hope so -- but legislative leaders have spread the word to special interests to not bring their conflicts to the Capitol this spring as the government internalizes its struggles.

This session will be about the administration and Legislature versus state employees, colleges, college students, school boards, the lieutenant governor's office, health-care providers and those relying on government services that might be eliminated, consolidated or privatized.

Fittingly, the session opened with a House divided on the speaker pro tem position. For the first time in collective memory, a leadership contest came down to a roll call vote, in which the speaker's choice, Rep. Joel Robideaux, I-Lafayette, prevailed by only five votes over Rep. Noble Ellington, D-Winnsboro.

Everyone was amicable, but the stubbornly close election signals that resolutions won't come easily on many a matter this year.

Members of the House Appropriations Committee may feel like they have been through a full session already, after meeting throughout March to go over the executive budget, section by section, and hearing one hard-luck story after another about what a particular cut would mean to some group.

College officials, who have seen \$250 million excised from their campuses in the past 15 months, were relieved when the governor's executive budget contained no additional cuts. Their relief was short-lived.

With the end of federal stimulus dollars leaving higher education with a \$290 million revenue hole in "cliff year" 2011-12, some Appropriations Committee members want colleges to start cutting back now.

Chairman Jim Fannin, D-Jonesboro, is the most courtly gentleman in the House, but to college presidents he is the Grim Reaper. He darkly told college leaders he would visit with them soon and give them a dollar

figure that he wants to see chopped from their upcoming budgets.

As a result, college students could be in for a double whammy of having to pay higher tuition -- the governor proposes letting schools raise fees by 10 percent per year -- and getting less for it with cutbacks on instructors and class offerings.

In another first in memory, classified state employees will be denied their once-automatic 4 percent merit raises, while basic support for school districts could be frozen for a second year in a row.

Community hospitals are upset that the new budget pays higher reimbursement rates to public hospitals. But two or three years from now the community hospitals will still be here, while some of their public counterparts might not be.

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Few at the Capitol are even trying to put a positive spin on the task ahead. "We're beyond having to do more with less," said Rep. Fannin. "We're at the point where we have to do less with less."