CHICO -- Talk of "a big shoe dropping" dominated a budget discussion at Chico State University Friday.

That heavy boot is the possibility the California State University system will get a $500 million budget cut on top of the $500 million cut that is already proposed.

"Sometimes it feels like an apocalyptic moment, especially with that other shoe that may drop," campus President Paul Zingg said at a meeting of the University Budget Committee Friday morning in Kendall Hall.

And, in an email he sent out to the campus Friday, Zingg wrote, "with similar cuts coming to the UC and Community College systems, the state's visionary Master Plan for Higher Education has never been more imperiled."

At Friday's budget meeting, Zingg recapped how the CSU and Chico State got into the present situation. The committee is made up of about 25 Chico State leaders.

Last fall, the CSU Board of Trustees proposed a budget that called on the state to increase the system's funding by $600 million, Zingg said. But Gov. Brown proposed cutting the CSU budget by $500 million.
Unwelcome as that cut is, Zingg said Brown deserves credit for facing California's "$26-to-28 billion problem" head on. Instead of taking the usual "smoke-and-mirrors" approach, the governor is trying to put the state on a solid fiscal footing, the president said.

Brown's proposed budget relies on voters approving extensions of three tax increases that are set to expire. The governor has been trying to get the Legislature to approve putting the tax extensions before the voters in a special election in June.

Here is where the "big shoe" comes in. If the tax extensions don't get on the ballot or aren't approved by voters, state funding for the CSU and many other entities will need to be cut by much more. It's said this scenario would result in the CSU's taking another $500 million cut.

If the tax increases aren't extended in June, Zingg said he expects a measure to increase taxes will be put before voters in November, possibly through an initiative.

Here, the president said he sees "a sliver of hope." That's because the governor has suggested that a third of the $30 billion to $40 billion such a tax hike would raise (over four to five years) would be reserved for education, from kindergarten through graduate school. That could represent "a new compact" between the state and education, Zingg said.

Provost Sandra Flake said the looming budget cuts follow a number of lean years that have forced the CSU to economize. Now, more ways to save money are being discussed.

"We are seeing the number of sections go down and the size of classes go up," she said.

She talked about some of the steps that have been taken to conserve revenue. In some cases, large-enrollment courses have been "redesigned" so they can be taught by fewer instructors. Many vacant positions have not been filled, and the money saved is used to hire part-time teachers. When full-time instructors have been hired, it is on a temporary basis.

Discussions are being held about how many departments the various colleges should have and whether some units can be combined. Buying equipment has been postponed. There is talk of offering fewer electives, so students will take more required courses and graduate sooner.

Zingg said Chico State stands committed to serving its students and "trying to sustain our workforce," as well as pursuing its primary values, which include learning, diversity and service, among others.

If the CSU budget is cut by $500 million, the system's state funding will be at the same level it was in 1999, yet there are many more students than in 1999, he said. "Access, affordability and quality all will be diminished."

The CSU enrollment target for next year has been reduced by 8,000 students, he said, adding, "with that other $500 million shoe, that absolutely would have an effect on next year's target. We would be told to do everything we can to draw down enrollments."
Zingg said no full-time faculty were laid off last year and that he hoped that will be the case this year, too.

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