

# Democrats team up to tackle budget

**Legislators hope to put a human face on spending cuts sought by Schwarzenegger.**

**By Alexa H. Bluth and Kevin Yamamura -- Bee Capitol Bureau  
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Senate and Assembly Democrats announced plans this week for a coordinated statewide campaign to take on parts of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's budget, which leaders charged borrows ideas from "right-wing think tanks" and hurts middle-class families.

Democratic leaders said they will present an alternate plan to the governor's \$111.7 billion budget proposal, including his calls to freeze spending for schools, highways and the poor.

They said they will seek to seal off tax loopholes and to win more federal money for the state instead of calling for raising taxes, but would not categorically rule out a tax hike.

They also reacted to Schwarzenegger's statement earlier in the week that "we don't want to feed the monster" in reference to public-sector programs.

"Government is in no way, shape or form a monster that needs to be starved," said Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez, D-Los Angeles. "I will not support a budget that starves Californians of the services that they depend on and of the services that make us a first-class state."

Núñez said he would invite working Californians to budget hearings across the state, on evenings and on weekends.

He also said Democrats will not rule out seeking to place competing budget measures on the ballot later this year if they cannot work out an acceptable compromise with the governor and legislative Republicans, whose votes are needed to pass a budget.

Majority Democrats again are avoiding calling for a politically unpopular tax increase during their second round of budget talks with the Republican governor, although some Democrats have long said tax hikes are imperative to balance the state's budget. Instead, they say they are going to borrow from Schwarzenegger's trademark strategy of going "to the people" to try to illustrate how cuts alone will affect working families and senior citizens.

"We are using this as an opportunity to hear from the residents that are most affected by the budget the governor has proposed," said Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata, D-Oakland.

He announced a series of Senate budget committee hearings to be held in the next six weeks throughout the state. In particular, the Senate has planned three education budget hearings in Fresno, Salinas and San Diego next month in a town-hall format to examine the governor's spending proposals and ways to increase local control of schools.

Perata also responded to swipes at Democrats and their programs made Tuesday by Schwarzenegger.

"You know, the beast in this case includes the newly born, people who are disabled and people who for no fault of their own are unable to function like those in this room," Perata said, addressing reporters in a Capitol press conference. "So we want to put that kind of a face on it."

H.D. Palmer, a spokesman for the governor's Finance Department, said the budget was built around ideas from Schwarzenegger's finance director, Tom Campbell, and not from "right-wing think tanks," and he dismissed charges that the plan unfairly targets working families.

"Middle-class families have to live within their means, and so should the state," Palmer said.

Schwarzenegger press secretary Margita Thompson said the governor met with congressional leaders Thursday during his trip

to Washington for President Bush's inauguration. She said he and Rep. David Dreier, R-San Dimas, are planning a gathering with California's congressional delegation next month to try to secure more federal money for the state.