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Roberts discusses possible budget cuts

State lawmaker takes questions at Legislative Lowdown event

By Garrett Griffin Andrews

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State Rep. Ellen Roberts warned residents of impending budget cuts and took a toughlove approach with constituents who raised questions Saturday at the annual Legislative Lowdown, presented by the League of Women Voters of La Plata County.

"We have about a billion (dollars) that we need to cut from the budget," she said. "I know it's depressing, but I need to tell you these things."

The belt-tightening in Denver will have reverberations in the Four Corners, and the outspoken moderate reminded voters at the Durango Public Library that higher education and health care likely are to feel a pinch.

"My challenge to everybody is, let's try to find a common solution," she said of tense debate in Denver over health-care cuts. "There's just too much money at stake."

Unforeseen circumstances kept her colleague state Sen. Jim Isgar from attending, so Roberts took all the questions, some regarding the stimulus bill in Washington, D.C., the effects of the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights amendment – "We can't blame TABOR for what we're going through" – and getting Denver network television broadcast to all area homes, a staple at Durango-area political functions.

About 100 people came to hear Roberts, R-Durango, discuss her work in Denver and took the opportunity to ask questions and raise concerns. She discussed the six bills she has sponsored this legislative session – three now before the Senate and three awaiting house approval – and her committee assignments.

Term-limit requirements put a cap on tenure at eight years in the House of Representatives, so about one-third of Roberts' colleagues in the House are new faces.

After the Lowdown, Roberts described an anxious climate in a cash-strapped Legislature.

"I think we're going to start seeing a lot more stress in some legislators as we get to the tougher topics like this transportation bill, like tuition for undocumented students, healthcare bills," she said. "The heat's turning up."

She clarified the role of state government in all of this, too.

"My concern is that Washington, D.C., and a one-size-fitsall approach to complex problems doesn't work, and I don't want us to throw good money after bad," she said.

Roberts worked with prosecutors and defense attorneys this summer on rehabilitating youth offenders, an issue she has made a priority in her legislative career. The two resulting bills now are in the House of Representatives, through the committee stage and ready for a vote.

House Bill 1044 would allow a juvenile charged as an adult to petition a judge to seal an arrest record for crimes committed while the individual was still a minor.

It also would allow judges more discretion with minors who have committed certain nonviolent crimes and already have served sentences in the youth offender system.

Roberts said that with 98 percent of the prison population to be released into the general population at some point, helping reformed youth offenders obtain employment after rehabilitation is smart social policy and good for the economy.

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