

The ADVOCATE

Democrats' budget is sweet on Stamford

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HARTFORD -- The Democrats' budget plan, passed by a 19-16 vote Thursday afternoon, contains considerable sweetening for Stamford. But Senators Bob Duff, D-Norwalk, and Andrew McDonald, D-Stamford, had stark differences in opinion over the spending package.

Earlier this year both lawmakers, who also represent Darien, came out against the initial income-tax hikes proposed by party leaders.

Thursday Duff was one of five Democrats who voted against their party's two-year taxation and spending plan, but a list of perks for Stamford turned McDonald into an enthusiastic convert.

"There's a lot of this package that's very difficult for everyone, but overall it positions Stamford very well to grow in the future," McDonald said during an interview.

The Democrats' budget:

- Increases state education aid to Stamford by \$426,769 in 2009-10 and 2010-11 despite flat-funding most other communities;
- Reverses Gov. M. Jodi Rell's proposal to shutter J. M. Wright Technical School and invests \$150,000 in state efforts to boost and maintain enrollment;
- Reverses Rell's decision to close the part-time

Department of Motor Vehicles branch in Stamford;

- Reverses an earlier decision by the Democrats to eliminate funding to the bankrupt Stamford Center for the Arts, and instead provides the organization \$427,500 during each of the next two fiscal years;

- Sets aside \$140,000 for Stamford's Trailblazers Academy, a charter middle school run by The Domus Foundation, to hire a nurse.

Rell is expected to veto the measure.

Duff acknowledged the Democrats' budget did not do nearly as much for Norwalk, although it reverses Rell's proposal to close the Norwalk courthouse and also restores other cuts Duff had opposed, such as to school-based family resource centers.

Duff said he is concerned about the effect of his party's proposed income-, estate- and corporate-tax increases on lower Fairfield County and believes state lawmakers need to stop viewing the region as Connecticut's "rich uncle."

The Democrats did decrease the scope of their income tax increases in part to try and satisfy Duff and McDonald. The earlier package both Senators criticized targeted households of \$250,000 or above and increased the current maximum rate from 5 percent to 7.9 percent.

The increases approved yesterday begin at households of \$500,000 and raise the maximum rate to 7.5 percent.

McDonald said he tried to analyze the impact on constituents and concluded only about 1,714 of Stamford's 53,220 tax filers would pay more.

"I think in this economy everybody has to take part in helping to solve our budget crisis," McDonald

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said. "And asking that a couple who makes \$600,000 pay \$1,000 of additional taxes is certainly a sacrifice, but one I think is important for our state to survive this recession."

Duff was not certain how many of his constituents earned \$500,000 or more, but said it is bad long-term policy for the state to continue to rely on income-tax hikes.

"That continues to destabilize our revenue stream," he said, adding he is also concerned about the impact of impact on Norwalk's businesses.

Duff argued his party needs to make more budget cuts before pursuing taxes but did not offer any specifics.

State Sen. L. Scott Frantz, R-Greenwich, who joined the Senate's GOP minority in voting against the budget, called it "disastrous."

"What the majority party in the Senate just did is pull the window shade down and say 'Connecticut is closed for business and for anybody who is remotely successful in life,' " Frantz said.

The Democrats' proposal also makes changes to the state's film tax-credit program, which has lured many productions to Fairfield County and NBC Studios to Stamford. But a lobbyist for the industry said Thursday many of the proposals were suggested by industry insiders, which heartened Frantz.

Frantz said he had not had a chance to review some of the aid given Stamford, which he also represents, but said he had heard someone say the Democrats clearly wanted to win over McDonald.

Asked if an effort was made to woo at least one Fairfield County Democrat - Duff or McDonald - to

vote on the budget, Sen. President Donald Williams, D-Brooklyn, said the goal was to get a majority of Democrats to back the plan.

"Yes, it's true there were some additions for Fairfield County," Williams said.

But he said efforts were made to make the overall proposal more palatable to other Senators as well, including the alterations to the income tax.

"The tax bite is significantly smaller than what we proposed before today," Williams said.

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