

Washington State deepens austerity measures

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Washington State Democratic Party Governor Christine Gregoire smiled and joked as she signed the first in a series of budget reductions Wednesday. The legislation imposes \$480 million in cuts to education, mental health, state parks and other departments. The Governor noted that the millions in reductions she signed on Wednesday is just “a down payment,” and that she expects the state legislators to return in January, “Tan, rested and ready,” to complete the job of cutting an additional \$1.5 billion.

The cuts were the product of a bipartisan agreement by the state legislature in a special session called for by Gregoire. Originally intended to last 30 days, the legislature broke for recess after 17 days. The first days were disrupted by thousands of protestors calling for taxes to be imposed on the wealthy and no further cuts to education.

The state parks department has announced 83 of 189 full time park rangers will be receiving layoff notices in the next few weeks. There will also be layoffs of maintenance and construction workers. The exact number of remaining full-time jobs is unclear, since the department is lumping together part time jobs in the count. Some workers would be offered part time positions at greatly reduced schedules and pay. The cuts come after the summertime imposition of a \$30 non-transferable parks use fee meant to supplement the state parks’ already slashed budgets. Given the continued contraction of the economy, the added fee has had the effect of driving down park attendance.

Contained in the approved budget bill is a plan to delay the purchase of school buses to replace worn vehicles. Further cuts to education are promised in the next supplemental budget.

Tuitions at state universities have already doubled in the last three years as state funding has dried up. The new budget includes \$161.5 million in further cuts to higher education funding.

The governor is also making a push for a half-cent sales tax increase that will be on the general ballot, claiming that proposed cuts in education—including shortening the school year by four days—can be “bought back” by the taxpayers.

Such schemes violate Article IX, Section 1 of Washington’s constitution, which states, “It is the paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of all children residing within its borders, without distinction or preference on account of race, color, caste, or sex.”

This year, in *McCleary v. Washington*, King County Superior Court Judge John Ehrlich found that Washington is out of compliance with its constitutional paramount duty. He wrote, “State funding is not ample, it is not stable, and it is not dependable.” The state has appealed and the case is up for review by the State Supreme Court.

Another of Gregoire’s proposals is to privatize the state lottery system, with any savings brought about to go to education. “I want to see if the state lottery can be managed for less money through the private sector,” Gregoire stated. “If it works, it could provide more funds to support critical education programs.” This is of a part with the governor’s institution of a “Lean process improvements” scheme based on the Toyota model.

In keeping with the business-oriented plan, Gregoire also announced the appointment of seven business executives and representatives to the new Opportunity Scholarship program. Microsoft and Boeing, each having donated \$25 million, fund the program. Given Boeing’s estimated \$160 million per year state tax breaks, and Microsoft’s \$104 million “saved” in royalty taxes in 2010 alone, this is a pittance. Among those appointed to oversee the program are Boeing President and CEO Jim Albaugh and general counsel

for Microsoft, Brad Smith.



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