

Much to fear in Bush's budget

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Vermont stands to lose money on everything from affordable housing to programs for dairy farmers if President Bush's budget proposal is approved by Congress. The president released his plan Monday, revealing plans to cut services for health care, education, economic development, homeland security and more.

If approved by Congress, some of those programs might be eliminated without adequate funding. Others would be passed on to Vermont taxpayers to fill the gap.

Fortunately, Vermont's congressional delegation has a lot of help in opposing many of these cuts. Sens. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and Jim Jeffords, I-Vt., and Rep. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., need to keep the pressure on Capitol Hill to restore funding for programs important to Vermont.

One of the more disturbing cuts proposed by Bush is in agriculture, with the president seeking an end to \$5 billion in subsidy programs and wants to tax dairy producers. On the chopping block yet again is the Milk Income Loss Contract, which helps small family farmers in tough economic times. A coalition of farm-state lawmakers has protected this program and must continue its united front to ensure the MILC assistance continues to help struggling dairy farmers.

Another area targeted for a reduction is Medicare (\$36 billion over five years), a particularly odd cut given the current mess Vermont seniors and their counterparts throughout the country face as the federal government implements its new Medicare pharmaceutical program.

In addition, states like Vermont would lose their small share of Homeland Security funding, with more urban areas receiving the lion's share. Clearly, Vermont doesn't need the same level of protection as New York, but this state must safeguard an international airport, an international border and a nuclear power plant. That extra security isn't free.

The Community Development Block Grants, an \$8.3 million federal program that helps provide affordable housing and economic development, could be slashed by \$2.5 million in Vermont. Also of concern are reductions in funding to curb drug and alcohol abuse among school-age Vermonters, and more than 70 percent cuts to rural health care programs.

Finally, the regional Office of Economic Opportunity program could be significantly reduced (roughly half of the nation's 1,100 OEO offices might close) as a result of Bush's attempts once again to eliminate the \$630 million federal program. These offices are important, particularly in rural states, in helping low-income residents find affordable housing, heating assistance and more.

It is understandable that the president would seek to reduce spending given the nation's deficit that exceeded \$300 billion in 2005. But this problem must not be shifted to states to shoulder.

Democrats immediately criticized the president's plan, with Leahy calling it a "mismatch for the real priorities of ordinary Vermonters." Even Bush's own Republicans were quick to criticize, with Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., calling the education and health care reductions "scandalous."

Congress ought to continue to focus on balancing the federal budget, but not on the backs of Vermonters already struggling to make ends meet.