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State government's price must be balanced with realistic notion of value

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You can always count on budget season to bring one sure thing: a long line of worst-case scenarios in Dover. There just never seems to be enough money to go around.

The Joint Finance Committee is hearing round after round of state agency heads warn of near-disaster for their clients if they don't get more money.

No doubt many of these causes are righteous. No doubt as well that this year, because of the faltering economy, many of our more vulnerable fellow citizens are at greater risk.

But unlike their Washington counterparts, the JFC members can't indulge in fantasy budget-writing. Delaware law demands a balanced accounting of tax revenues and expenditures.

And, as hard as it seems, that discipline will pay off this year. The economy, as most everyone recognizes, is troubled. Companies and individuals are slowing their spending, assuming they have money to slow.

In March, the Delaware Economic and Financial Advisory Council will take a closer long at revenue projections. If the projections go down, Gov. Minner will have to make more cuts on an already tight budget.

Without a doubt this will hurt many agencies and their clients. But avoiding hard decisions now will lead to a special legislative session to raise taxes later (as happened in Maryland) or the governor touring every county to plead for more toll revenues (as New Jersey's Gov. Corzine is currently doing).

However, difficult times like this call for something beyond government business as usual.

Government has a price. We pay it in the taxes we turn over to it. Government also has a value. We find in the services it provides. The crucial question is whether the government is getting its money's worth.

A recent examination of the state's school system raised some doubts. Delaware has one of the most expensive school systems in the country, but its performance is rated in the middle of the pack.

The governor-appointed Leadership for Education Achievement in Delaware Committee last month recommended that up to \$158 million can be saved annually by combining some programs, eliminating others and better managing the rest. None of their recommendations cut into the basic missions of the schools -- education children.

Just think what our schools could do if the state followed even a small portion of these recommendations and saved just \$25 million a year. They could have tutors, more math specialists, higher-paid teachers and much more.

Now just think what money could be saved by applying a LEAD-type study to the rest of state government.

No doubt, the savings could help many of those troubled citizens the agency heads want to help.

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