

## House approves budget

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The S.C. House approved on March 12 a \$7.2 billion budget for state spending. This time each year I pull out for this column some of the items in the budget that are important to the citizens of Kershaw County.

From the beginning, the projections for state revenues were flat. This makes budget writing challenging because of increases in costs and population. In the end, the House budget represents a 4.5 percent reduction in spending over last year's budget, while fully funding education under the Education Finance Act and fully funding health agencies. All other agencies received a 2.36 percent cut. Given the current economic climate, I believe that this budget is a good one overall that works toward controlling the costs of government while investing in the state's future.

Here are some highlights of this year's budget:

- Full funding of the Education Finance Act (EFA) to a base student cost of \$2,578. The total average funding per pupil, including state, federal and local funding, is projected to be \$11,480.
- The replacement cycle for school buses is fully funded, with additional money for the purchase of school bus service vehicles.
- Teacher salaries will increase to \$300 above the southeast average. Teachers will also receive additional funding for classroom supplies.
- Funding for Department of Juvenile Justice programs that target gang-related activity through intervention programs.
- Continued funding for LIFE, HOPE, and Palmetto Fellows Scholarship programs.
- \$5 million for the Hydrogen Grants program. These funds provide grants for hydrogen-based enterprises, an increasing area of expertise in South Carolina's higher education system.
- \$3 million in Rural Hospital Grants that will help serve citizens in need of medical services in the rural counties of South Carolina.
- A one percent base pay increase for state employees, along with no premium increases or changes in benefits to participants in the State Health Plan.
- Funding for a new class of 50 law enforcement officers, and more than \$800,000 for law enforcement safety equipment, such as firearms, body armor, holsters, and flashlights.

The following three items are ones in which I was particularly involved during this year's budget debate:

- Continued funding for Smart-Ride. This program provides mass transportation for commuters from Camden to Columbia and Newberry to Columbia. This program has been very successful and deserves continued funding despite a perennial veto by the Governor.
- Directing funds from the Department of Commerce toward creating a statewide rail plan that will better connect South Carolina's economic centers. I negotiated with the Department of Commerce to undertake the development of a plan so that South Carolina can capitalize on its ports, both sea and inland; efficiently and effectively utilize more bio-fuels; and move further along on commuter rail proposals, including one from Camden to Columbia. A statewide rail plan will also aid the state in qualifying for federal funds for rail projects.
- Directing the Information Technology Management Office to develop procedures to maximize procurement of technological products that are rated by the Electronic Product Environmental Assessment Tool (EPEAT).

This last item recognizes the importance of electronics in today's world. EPEAT is a system that helps consumers make environmentally friendly and energy-conscious decisions when purchasing electronics. EPEAT examines and reviews products so consumers can make informed, cost-saving decisions.

Today, any large company or organization utilizes numerous desktop computers, monitors, and notebook computers in the course of everyday business. Now imagine how many electronic devices are used in operating state government.

Every time the State purchases a computer or laptop is an opportunity to protect the environment *and* save money. Under the EPEAT guidelines, the State of South Carolina can save taxpayer dollars with energy-efficient electronics. Over the course of a product's lifetime, operating an EPEAT-rated computer will be more cost-effective.

EPEAT standards also reduce material waste, reduce air pollution, reduce water pollution, reduce toxic material use, and avoid hazardous waste disposal. These additional areas of efficiency translate to lower costs for government and for government services, as well as acting as an incentive for economic development for green electronics.

The implementation of EPEAT guidelines in all future electronics purchases across state government is a simple plan for saving money and helping to care for our environment. Incorporating this policy into the budget is only one of the ways that the General Assembly has been working to be good stewards of the public trust.