

# ***House Leaders to Governor: Embrace Transparency and Cooperation in Shaping New Budget***

**By State House Minority Leader Richard Cathcart & State House Minority Whip Dan Short**

Just a few months ago, our state closed what was arguably the most difficult budget cycle in state history, bridging a financial gap measured in the hundreds-of-millions-of-dollars and enacting a balanced budget.

That enormous task was accomplished with bipartisan cooperation and, more importantly, under the watchful eye of the press and the public.

It makes it all the more disappointing that Gov. Jack Markell has turned his back on this success and begun the Fiscal Year 2011 budget process by holding a secret, closed-door meeting with a small cadre of Democratic legislative leaders to discuss the new financial challenges facing our state.

Speaking in a recent published report about the clandestine meeting, Sen. Robert Venables said the state could again face a huge breach in the budget that begins July 1st: "The figure we got is a \$337 million gap – right now – that we got to close."

Just as was the case that led to the current budget (FY 2010), what we do to close this gap will impact every Delawarean. Mending the FY 2010 budget hole – estimated at nearly \$800 million – meant eliminating hundreds of open state jobs, cutting the compensation of state workers, and enacting a package of tax and fee increases topping \$212 million! No one was left unscathed.

We all have a stake in the budget process, but the governor has chosen to invite only a select few into the process thus far. According to published comments from Sen. Venables, who is chairman of the Bond Bill Committee, House Majority Leader Pete Schwartzkopf and Speaker of the House Bob Gilligan met in the governor's office on October 20<sup>th</sup> with Office of Management and Budget Director Ann Visalli for a private briefing.

Just 10 months ago, the governor promised a different approach. Delivering his inaugural address, the governor stated: "I pledge that my administration will be more transparent and accountable than any that have come before."

Holding secret, partisan budget meetings are not only contrary to this goal, it creates mistrust that is difficult to overcome. No doubt the people involved will say these are only preliminary meetings, held to iron out details before they're

disclosed to everyone later. In fact, in commenting on the recent meeting, the governor's spokesman, Joe Rogalsky, said that in time everyone would be briefed.

But meeting behind closed doors, even if done innocently, sends the wrong message to a public that has good reason to question the operation of state government.

Earlier this year, Speaker of the House Bob Gilligan sponsored a new law to make the General Assembly subject to the state's Freedom of Information Act. One of the most important implications of this landmark legislation was to open the meetings of the legislature's budget-writing Joint Finance Committee and Bond Bill Committee. It's ironic that the people that most touted this worthy legislation took part in the recent secret budget meeting.

We do not believe Speaker Gilligan, Gov. Markell or House Majority Leader Schwartzkopf intended any malice when they held their meeting. Unfortunately, when you conduct these types of gatherings it's hard to shake the perception that the real decisions are being made behind closed doors and that the information that's later shared with the public is carefully crafted to justify those predetermined choices.

There's a simple solution to this and it's in keeping with the governor's stated objectives for transparency – hold all budgetary meetings involving executive branch and legislative leaders openly. The meetings can be posted in advance and streamed live on the Internet. If this proves too cumbersome, they can be recorded and posted to a dedicated page on the state's website within 24 hours. The second option, while less desirable, could be implemented immediately and would give the public a chance to track the process and have a record of how it progresses.

Additionally, as we work on the next budget, partisanship needs to take a back seat to openness and consensus. Republicans need to be made complete partners in the process. Not only do Republican state legislators represent more than 40-percent of all Delawareans, we also played a key role in shaping and enacting our current balanced budget.

We urge the governor to conduct future budgetary meetings in the open, bringing all legislative leaders, regardless of party affiliation, together in a cooperative effort to address our shared challenges.

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