

Something stinks in Lansing -- and it isn't the pig parked on the front lawn of the Capitol or the chickens that recently spent time in the House gallery.

It's the smell of fear that's emanating from the legislative chambers due to the \$1.75 billion budget crisis that's brought our state to the brink of a government shutdown.

Instead of having the courage to raise sufficient revenues to pay for vital services that Michigan needs, stubborn lawmakers are in a standoff to save their political hides. They're more worried about recall and re-election than about doing what's right.

Do what's right

Our legislators -- Democrats and Republicans -- must raise sufficient revenues to keep Michigan afloat. They must immediately patch the gaping hole left from tax cuts that threaten our quality of life. They need to resist the strong-armed tactics of fanatics who demand further program cuts or other so-called "reforms" to justify additional revenues.

They need to make public education the top priority because it is sound economic development policy, and because they need to be held accountable for their own campaign promises to protect education.

Instead of courage at the Capitol, we've mostly seen chaos:

- A huge pink pig pulled on a trailer in front of the Capitol, a reminder to all that there's "pork" to be cut. The pig also serves as a reminder of the short-sighted recall threats facing lawmakers. This should not stop our legislators from doing the right thing.
- People dressed in chicken suits who entertained during a lull one day, suggesting that our leaders are afraid to make the tough calls.

Little substantive progress despite marathon meetings, unusual weekend House sessions and mounting pressure from constituents back home over the prospect of a government shutdown.

It isn't pretty in Lansing, to be sure. And it's hurting the entire state.

When it comes to public education, the impact is devastating.

Nearly three months ago, K-12 school districts were required by law to pass their own balanced budgets. Because schools didn't know then -- and still don't -- how much money they'll receive for the 2007-08 school year, many planned for the worst. Scores of districts cut important programs and laid off teachers and other school employees -- to the detriment of the local and state economies and children.

Many schools can't hire the teachers they need to implement new rigorous high school requirements. They're hoping they'll be in a better financial situation a year from now; given the

current standoff, don't bet on it.

Community colleges and public universities increased the cost of tuition by double-digit percentages in some instances. At a time when having a highly trained work force is critical for Michigan to attract and retain new business, such decisions are ill-timed, to say the least.

Situation could worsen

The bad news is, it could get worse. If the Legislature fails to do its job by Oct. 1 and Michigan government shuts down, some school districts might, too. Many lack sufficient funds to continue operating without regular state aid that's slated to start arriving in October.

The good news? The power to solve these problems lies with the people of Michigan. Our elected leaders need to hear their constituents say that standing up for principle is more important than cowering in the face of political consequences. They need a reminder that they were hired to do what's right instead of what's popular, even if there's a price to pay.

This high-stakes game of political "chicken" has dragged on too long. It's time to restore some character to the Capitol and clean up the barnyard aroma.

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