

Economic storm blows through state

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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Budget gap, redistricting are top challenges for state senators.

In the midst of a financial storm is how Sen. John Wightman describes the state's projected \$986 million budget shortfall.

And state senators must figure out the best way to navigate through the tempest during the 102nd Legislature which begins Jan. 5.

"If there's a double-dip recession similar to what we had in the '30s, no one has an answer," Wightman said. "But it doesn't appear it will be."

In addition to figuring out how to fill the budget gap, he said another major issue during the 90-day session will be how to redistrict, or reset, political boundaries.

To help the budget situation, Wightman said the governor is considering dipping into the state's cash reserve and taking between \$250 and \$327 million.

The best way to solve the problem is to cut spending, the senator said.

"Some programs or agencies may be cut completely," he said.

Education and health and human services take the biggest chunk but Medicaid—a federal health program that assists the poor—and Medicare are largely off the table because of the state's dependence on federal matching funds, Wightman said.

Medicare provides health insurance to Americans 65 and older.

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Another issue Wightman struggles with is how much the state should fund charitable institutions—like Lutheran Family Services—which provide health services.

“I think the government has to do some of it,” Wightman said, noting that some should also be done privately.

In Lexington, Lutheran Family Services offers maternal health care and counseling to people in need.

Health and human services, state aid to education and the University of Nebraska system make up about 70% of the budget, Wightman said.

State aid to education will be reduced, he said, but the question is

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