

Education may come at a higher cost

MICHAEL MAHARREY
Staff Writer

University of South Florida St. Petersburg students already experiencing the impact of state university budget cuts in the classroom may personally feel the pinch during the spring semester.

The Florida Legislature passed a budget bill last week authorizing a 5 percent increase in tuition for state universities. If Gov. Crist signs the bill, the increase will take effect in January.

The increase will add approximately \$55 per semester to a full-time student's tuition and will generate an additional \$20 million in revenue for state schools, according to state budget estimates.

The Legislature also approved an additional \$114 million cut in state funding for Florida four-year and community colleges. The state slashed \$1.1 billion from university funding earlier this year.

Gov. Crist opposed recent attempts to increase tuition and vetoed a similar hike earlier this year, but said he will consider allowing this increase to take effect.

"I am not favorably predisposed to raising tuition because I feel for the people and don't want them to have to pay more," he said.

But after meeting with university officials and learning that 30 percent of the increase will be directed toward students who can't afford to go to college, Gov. Crist plans to reexamine the issue.

"That mitigates it to me and makes it a little more palatable, so we'll see," he said.

Ashok Dhingra, regional vice chancellor for administrative and financial services, said he has not yet looked at the specific impact for USF St. Petersburg, but the school has already taken steps to deal with any additional cuts.

A 4 percent cut in state funding earlier this year meant a revenue decrease of nearly \$1.2 million for USF St. Petersburg. The school cut its budget in the fall to make up for the funding shortfall and made additional cuts anticipating the possibility of a further decrease in state funding.

Projected savings from adjusting the thermostats amounted to \$200,000 and

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were earmarked to offset additional budget cuts.

Dhingra said he thought the tuition hike would generate approximately \$175,000 in the spring semester.

"The additional money will help," he said. "If we took a cut, we'll look and see if we can restore money to the budget."

Dhingra said that he would specifically look at restoring money to the budget for new faculty so the school could begin actively recruiting additional instructors.

State appropriations, which are made up of taxes and lottery money, account for 78 percent of the school's revenue. Tuition makes up the remainder. The flow of tax money into state coffers slowed significantly last year due to the housing slump.