

Budget mess aside, what about the other problems?

By MARC LEVY
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Pennsylvania's worrisome fiscal condition aside, there are several other long-standing financial thorns — such as an underfunded transportation network — that state government has failed to address, even in good financial times.

Now, Gov. Ed Rendell and legislators are being forced to discuss these matters in an election year when the recession has left unemployment high, jobs scarce and voters uneasy about government deficits.

"We can no longer ignore these issues," said Johnna Pro, a spokeswoman for state House Appropriations Committee Chairman Dwight Evans, D-Philadelphia. "Lawmakers will have to make some very difficult choices."

For starters, the state is still counting on the Federal Highway Administration to approve its 2½-year-old application to add tollbooths to Interstate 80.

That's worth an extra \$450 million a year to highways, bridges and mass transit systems. But even with that money, the state would be \$750 million short of what a Rendell-appointed commission

recommended be spent annually to maintain Pennsylvania's transportation infrastructure.

If the feds reject Pennsylvania's tolling plan — and no tolls have ever been added to an existing portion of the federally funded interstate highway system — there's an alternative: The Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission could continue borrowing the money for three more years, as it is currently doing.

But, eventually, legislators will need to find the money elsewhere.

"The last thing that we want to see happen here in Pennsylvania is some type of tragedy similar to what happened in Minnesota," where a 2007 bridge collapse killed 13 people, said Delaware County Rep. William Adolph, the ranking Republican on the House Appropriations Committee. "I think the taxpayers of Pennsylvania would also agree with that."

Then there's the state-subsidized adultBasic health insurance program, which offers coverage to lower-income adults for a monthly fee that will increase to \$36 in March.

Rendell wants the program to continue covering as many as 50,000 low-income adults. But

a six-year commitment by the state's nonprofit Blue Cross and Blue Shield insurers is set to expire Dec. 31, leaving about half the money for the approximately \$200 million adultBasic program in limbo.

The Blues are signaling that they do not want to continue the same level of commitment to the program — which has an approximately two-year waiting list — and are suggesting that other insurers help out.

Discussions among the insurers, the Rendell administration and top legislators are getting under way.

One of the costliest problems facing the state right now is the massive debt accumulating in the trust fund that pays unemployment benefits.

Pennsylvania has borrowed more than \$2 billion from the federal government — fourth-most behind California, Michigan and New York — thanks to the recession and a two-decade-old law that limits the tax collections that can go into the fund.

Even counting the penalties on employers and employees that kicked in this year — more are scheduled to start next year — the state Department of Labor and Industry projects the fund to be

underwater by \$7 billion in 2018.

A plan to correct that is being written into legislation, 15 months after Rendell asked negotiators for Republicans, Democrats, business groups and labor unions to address it.

Under the plan, taxes on employers and employees would rise in hopes that the debt is fully paid and the state ends 2018 with a positive balance in the fund. The scope of benefits will be scaled back, such as a proposal to limit the ability of a higher-income worker to collect severance pay and an unemployment check at the same time.

Senate Labor and Industry Committee Chairman John Gordner, R-Columbia, said he hopes to see the Legislature pass it this spring.

"This really can't wait until the end of the year or frankly even the budget" negotiations in the summer, Gordner said. "There's any number of huge issues out there. It'd be nice to get one out of the way."

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States eye ban on public release of 911

By DESIREE HUNTER
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Several states are considering measures that would keep 911 recordings from being heard by the public.

The measures come as a response to complaints that broadcasting such calls violates people's privacy and exposes them at their most vulnerable moments. Lawmakers in Alabama, Ohio and Wisconsin are deciding whether to bar the public release of 911 calls.

Open-government advocates say a ban would take away a valuable tool that has exposed botched calls and helped solve crimes.

Missouri, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Wyoming already keep such recordings private. But generally, most states consider emergency calls public records available on request, with exceptions sometimes made for privacy reasons or to protect a police investigation.

Judge OKs child support for Bristol Palin's son

By MARY PEMBERTON
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A judge on Thursday approved child support for Bristol Palin and set a trial date to force the issue along, while urging her and the father of her son to work out a resolution outside of the courtroom.

Judge Kari C. Kristiansen encouraged Palin and Levi Johnston, both 19, to work with a judge who specializes in such matters in a settlement conference and not go to trial. She set a court date for Sept. 23-24.

Kristiansen approved child support for Palin retroactive to the day the child was born. That amount still needs to be determined.

Bristol Palin is seeking nearly \$1,700 a month in child support to care for their son, Tripp. She had asked for retroactive payments to the boy's birth, or \$19,232 total. That does not include \$4,400 Johnston has already paid in child support.

Palin, a daughter of former Republican vice presidential

hearing in Palmer Superior Court, but her former fiance did not

Johnston's lawyer, that it would have been better if his client had participated.



Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons
Pictured right: Bristol Palin holding her brother Tripp, standing next to her sisters and father.

candidate Sarah Palin, attended the 20-minute child support

appear or participate by phone. Kristiansen told Rex Butler,

hasn't been forthcoming with his income. Attorney Thomas

Her pregnancy was announced just days after her mother, then governor of Alaska, was tapped by GOP presidential candidate John McCain to be his running mate. Palin and Johnston, a current Playgirl cover model, broke up shortly after Tripp's birth in December 2008.

Palin's lawyer has complained that Johnston

Van Flein previously asked that subpoenas be issued to obtain information on payments made to Johnston by Playgirl and media companies such as CNN, Entertainment Tonight, Vanity Fair, the National Enquirer, Star magazine and Insider.

Johnston has said he wasn't paid for many of the media interviews.

A judge hasn't ruled on the request.

The court is determining the amount of child support based on Johnston's adjusted gross income, which is estimated between \$100,000 and \$105,000. Johnston has said his income from the entertainment field can be erratic.

The judge on Thursday encouraged Butler to get his client's financial information to the court, saying it was past due. She granted issuing subpoenas to get that information.

Van Flein said he had "every confidence" that the child support issue would be resolved in the next two weeks.