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REGION: Locals relieved and worried by budget deal

By DAVE DOWNEY - Staff Writer

Officials of schools, health clinics and transportation agencies in San Diego and Riverside counties breathed a sigh of relief Friday as California's Democratic and Republican lawmakers ended their record-setting fiscal feud and passed a \$143 billion spending plan for a budget year that is almost three months old.

Finally, area health care officials can look forward to receiving checks from Sacramento again, said Barbara Mannino, chief executive officer of the Vista Community Clinic, which serves 51,000 people through its five health clinics in Vista and Oceanside and four after-school programs.

"The last check that we received from the state was at the beginning of August," Mannino said Friday, adding that state funding covers two-thirds of the clinics' program costs.

She said the clinics have had to hold off fixing a roof, buying a refrigerator for vaccines and filling staff vacancies to stretch remaining dollars.

School officials said they were grateful that earlier threats to cut 7 percent from funding for programs such as special education and class-size reduction were taken back.

And transportation officials said they were relieved that lawmakers kept their hands off the gasoline sales-tax revenue that is supposed to be reserved for highways, trains and buses.

"The good news is that they didn't divert Prop. 42 funding," said John Standiford, a spokesman for the Riverside County Transportation Commission, which is overseeing the expansion of western Riverside County's highway system.

But educators said they were disappointed that the new state budget includes a tiny, 0.68 percent cost-of-living increase for K-12 schools.

"It's going to be a tight year," said Jeff Okun, assistant superintendent of business support services for the Temecula Valley Unified School District.

Across the board, officials expressed deep concern about Sacramento's failure, yet again, to spend only what it takes in.

Lawmakers' penchant for punting fiscal problems into the future by borrowing could blow up in

a shaky economy, they warned, and makes it likely that the region will have to absorb substantial reductions in state funding next year.

"The budget this year is another house of cards," said Jennifer Walters, Escondido Unified School District superintendent. "They haven't addressed the ... deficit. Who knows if they will be able to find the same level of funding for 2009-10. It looks like we may be in for a troubled economy for some time."

John Roach, superintendent of the Carlsbad Unified School District, echoed the sentiment.

"I'm really concerned about the continued use of borrowing and the smoke and mirrors of getting the budget done," Roach said. "I'm afraid that this is really going to lead to school districts next January having to cut their budgets again. I don't believe that's what the public wants."

Nor does the public want its gas money siphoned from transportation to plug a hole in next year's budget, but Standiford said it may come to that if the state's fiscal condition worsens.

"If the situation gets desperate enough, it might be something that they would resort to," he said.

The uncertainty left by the budget deal is frustrating, Walters said.

"I wish that my staff could just worry about raising student achievement," Walters said. "As it is, we'll need to work on morale. Other states don't fund education so erratically. They just don't."

It all seems to go back to the way California elects its lawmakers, Roach said, saying there are so many solidly Republican and Democrat districts that most legislators are either very liberal or conservative, and do not reflect the majority of Californians who are in the middle.

"My view is you're sending Teddy Kennedy and Rush Limbaugh to Sacramento," Roach said.

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