

Northland lobbyists fine-tune message

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ST. PAUL — They will not know for months whether they were successful, but if nothing else, the Northeastern Minnesota residents were on message.

St. Louis County residents and business officials lobbying legislators Monday recognized the state's budget crisis and fine-tuned their appeals. They encouraged lawmakers to pay for local projects that have regional impact, could trigger millions more in federal funding and are ready to begin.

"As long as we could talk about job creation, leveraging [federal] funds and proj-

ects that are ready to go, people were ready to listen," Duluth City Council member Jeff Anderson said.

Organizers said more than 200 people traveled to St. Paul for Duluth and St. Louis County at the Capitol, the most popular lobbying event local communities host during the legislative session. Poor weather conditions prevented a busload of residents from attending.

A small group of business and civic leaders, health-care professionals and others met with Gov. Tim Pawlenty behind closed doors for about an hour Monday. Duluth Mayor Don

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Ness said that rather than pleading with the governor to spare his city from state aid cuts, he explained to Pawlenty tough budget decisions Duluth has made in recent years.

"People have a much greater appreciation for what Duluth has gone

through," Ness said of the governor and lawmakers.

Officials focused their requests on projects that would be paid for through state-borrowed funds, including infrastructure upgrades to Duluth's airport, wastewater system improvements and highway upgrades.

The governor was happy to hear the ideas, but whether they will move forward depends on a number of factors, including the pending federal economic stimulus package and whether the state passes a bill funding public works projects, Pawlenty spokesman Brian McClung said.

Lawmakers were non-committal.

"The leveraging [of federal funds] helps," said Democrat Keith Langseth of Glyndon, chairman of the Senate committee that would craft a bonding bill. "The timing is important, too — how much of it gets spent this year."

But, Langseth added, "certainly not all of them" will be funded.

As civic leaders advocated for infrastructure projects, college students said they were trying to prevent big tuition increases.

University of Minnesota Duluth student Jennifer McCabe said students expect tuition will increase, but they want to avoid double-digit hikes.

"The university has a big impact statewide," McCabe said.

They may be disappointed.

Rep. Bud Nornes, the ranking Republican on the House higher education committee, said that area

of the budget is targeted for big cuts.

"That's not going to be very pretty," Nornes said.

The Fergus Falls Republican said lawmakers want to avoid directly impacting students, but said universities and colleges will not be spared budget reductions.

Other Northeastern Minnesota officials wanted to let lawmakers know about existing projects and future needs.

Gordy Anderson of the Two Harbors Chamber of Commerce said he was telling legislators about the status of Two Harbors' marina project and reminded them that stretches of Minnesota 61 from Two Harbors to the Canadian border will need work in the coming years.

Federal money would pay for most of the highway repairs, but state aid will be needed, Anderson said.

"I know that dollars are limited, but we just have to stay on the radar screen," he said.

Legislators told the Northland lobbyists it still is early in the legislative session, which must adjourn by May 18.

Mike Orman plopped down in a chair in Sen. Yvonne Prettner-Solon's office. Orman was lobbying for \$4.9 million in state-borrowed funds for Duluth's airport project.

"We don't have to tell you anything except 'thanks,'" Orman told the Duluth Democrat, who supports the project.

"We haven't secured anything yet," Prettner-Solon cautioned.





June Kallestad of the Natural Resources Research Institute at Minnesota Duluth talks about the program with Rep. Phil Rosenthal, DFL-Edina, during Duluth Days on Monday at the State Capitol. *Scott Wentz / State Capitol Bureau*