

Next speaker of Ohio House says cuts will be biggest in decades

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By [Jim Siegel](#)

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Rep. William G. Batchelder, the Republican leader, said Medicaid is in line for significant reductions.

Rep. William G. Batchelder, the expected new House speaker next year, told the Ohio Council of Retail Merchants that he recalls working on some tough issues in the 1990s, "but I don't recall any of them quite like what we're going to face in this session."

"The budget is a huge challenge," he told the lunch crowd yesterday at the Columbus Athletic Club, noting that one might have to go back to 1937 to find the low proportion of debt-to-equity and income ratio that Ohio has now.

"I'm not sure what the answers are. It's going to be a serious problem that will require the very best people."

Batchelder, who next year enters his 35th year in the Ohio House, insisted he has those people on his team.

After shellacking the Democrats on Election Day, Batchelder will have at least a 58-41 majority, and it could reach 60 depending on final vote totals. His new majority is facing an estimated \$8 billion shortfall in the next two-year budget.

After his speech, the Medina resident said that kind of shortfall means there is no way to avoid making significant changes to Medicaid, the \$12.5 billion state-federal health insurance program for the poor and disabled.

"First, we have to apply for exceptions, a lot of them," Batchelder said, noting that in the past, the state asked the federal government for permission to expand Medicaid eligibility, but leaders now must go the other direction.

Asked if that meant reducing eligibility to 100 percent of the federal poverty level, \$22,050 for a family of four, Batchelder said, "That seems to me to be inevitable."

Nursing homes make up about 20 percent of Medicaid spending.

"We do have some wonderful nursing homes across this state and you don't want to damage the ability of people to obtain good nursing-home care, particularly as the number of Alzheimer's patients goes up," he said. "But we're doing things that are not necessary to do. My suspicion is there will be something done in those areas."

The House GOP caucus is expected to elect Batchelder as speaker this morning. Rep. Cheryl Grossman, R-Grove City, also is expected to be a member of majority leadership.

Batchelder told the audience that he had a "wonderful" freshman class coming in, along with budgeting veterans such as Reps. Ron Amstutz of Wooster and Sen. John A. Carey Jr. of Wellston to lean on. Carey will rejoin the House in 2010.

Batchelder put Rep. Randy Gardner, R-Bowling Green, in charge of rewriting House rules. Changes will include a two-day waiting period before the full House can vote on a budget bill that comes out of conference committee.

"We had bills coming to the floor that were still hot from the equipment and nobody knew what was in them," he said. "Those are the kind of things that are damaging to the reputation of the General Assembly and, more important, they undermine the confidence of the people of this state."

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