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Group calls for reforms to save state money News-Star - Online, The

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BATON ROUGE — Blueprint Louisiana, a group of business people formed to suggest ways to improve state government, offered a 14-point plan Monday that representatives say could plug at least \$1 billion of the \$1.6 billion deficit the state is facing this year.

Besides cutting what the group terms "inefficiencies," like management costs, certain programs and too many state employees, the plan promotes raising new revenue by imposing higher tuition for college students and fees on hospital visits.

The recommendations to be presented to the Legislature include suggestions in three basic areas: general government, health care and higher education. The cost savings and revenue-producing measures combined total \$972 million to \$1.6 billion, according to Blueprint figures.

"We encourage not only thoughtful discussion about these and other ideas, but bold and decisive action to advance statewide priorities that build a foundation for sustainable government," said Blueprint Louisiana chairman Bill Fenstermaker of Lafayette, CEO of an engineering, surveying and environmental consulting firm.

Several of the proposals reflect ideas being pushed by Gov. Bobby Jindal, the Department of Health and Hospitals and higher education leaders.

Besides raising higher education tuition, the group will push "eliminating programs that do not meet acceptable standards," referring to the Board of Regents list of more than 450 low-completer programs at colleges and universities, said Blueprint co-founder Clay Allen of Lafayette termed.

The plan calls for giving campuses freedom to increase tuition to what Allen termed "market-based" levels in exchange for focusing on academic performance and eliminating programs. They should also receive more freedom to manage their budgets, all things that higher education officials and Jindal are supporting.

Jimmy Maurin of Hammond, chairman of Stirling Properties, said "across-the-board cuts are a mistake, in cutting state employees and everything else. It's got to be surgically done."

He said the Legislature should impose targeted reductions that eliminate inefficiency.

One of the suggestions is to reduce the number of state employees by 9,486 over a two-year period, which would save \$235 million. Another \$100 million in potential savings would come from eliminating some statutory dedicated funding to specific units.

Phillip Rozeman, a Shreveport cardiologist who is on Blueprint's executive committee, said the group joins with many health care providers in proposing a \$3 per patient fee on hospitals to generate money that can be used to increase federal matching funds.

Hospitals would pay the fee and receive as much as \$245 million more in federal funds, so "I don't see this as something that would flow to private sector insurance," he said.

Former Gov. Kathleen Blanco's administration imposed such a fee a year before Hurricane Katrina hit and generated \$87

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million in the one year it was in effect.

Jindal does not support the "provider fee. He considers it raising taxes.

DHH Secretary Bruce Greenstein endorsed Blueprint's urging the adoption of a coordinated care system as proposed by the DHH for implementation next year. The change moves from a pure fee-for-service system to a system that coordinates care.

The group also is pushing what Maurin termed being "smart on crime." It proposes amending some of the state's strict sentencing laws that send people to prison for life for nonviolent crimes and allowing parole for inmates who are not a threat to society.

"We simply incarcerate more people than any other state in the union," he said. "Do we have more criminals?"