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Congressmen must explain cuts in critical programs

By Bob Cohen and Trudi Renwick

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The media focus on the political gamesmanship in Washington, D.C., sometimes makes it hard to see the concrete impact on our lives. But the current fight over the federal budget affects every man, woman, child and business in New York.

For six years, under the Bush administration and the Republican-controlled Congress, vital human needs went unmet while billions in reckless tax breaks were enacted for millionaires and corporate interests. This jeopardized important responsibilities like education, health care and environmental protection, while further widening the differences in take-home pay between high and low-income households.

This year, the House of Representatives, under new leadership, started moving in a new direction. The House passed an appropriations bill in July containing essential funding increases for programs critical to caring for our children, training workers and protecting the health of the most vulnerable people in our communities. And the 276-140 vote was on a bipartisan basis, with 53 Republicans aligning with the Democratic congressional leadership.

Despite his large drop in popularity, President Bush still is turning a tin ear to the needs of the people, threatening to veto congressional appropriations bills that spend at higher levels than he proposed in his budget. Three members of New York's congressional delegation, including Reps. Thomas Reynolds, R-Clarence, Randy Kuhl, R-Hammondsport, and Peter King, R-Long Island, have pledged to vote to sustain a presidential veto, and they appear to have enough support to prevail.

According to a new Fiscal Policy Institute analysis, a budget based on the president's proposal would mean a \$1 billion cut in federal aid other than Medicaid to New York State and its local governments in 2008. New York's funding for vocational and adult education would be cut by 40 percent, clean and safe drinking water by 22 percent, low-income energy assistance by 19 percent and community development block grants by 21 percent.

The Commodity Supplemental Food Program, which helps 28,300 low-income elderly New Yorkers, would be eliminated. Last year, after-school programs serving 34,000 children statewide were threatened with closure because of shortfalls in federal funding; these programs still would be endangered.

For the first time in years, we have a realistic chance to reverse the upsidedown priorities of the Bush administration, but we must speak out. Already, four members of Congress who pledged to sustain a presidential veto have had second thoughts, by voting for the July appropriations bill. First and foremost, we must ask Reynolds, Kuhl and King whether they are in Congress to serve their fellow New Yorkers or to blindly follow the president.

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