

State budget passes House

BY JIM DAVENPORT
AND LEIGH STROPE
ASSOCIATED PRESS

After eight days of debate, the South Carolina House approved next year's spending priorities 76-38 in a bill lauded by Republicans and loathed by Democrats.

"We made a commitment late last year that the next House budget would remain focused on education but would also be more responsible to the taxpayers," House Speaker David Wilkins, R-Greenville, said Wednesday.

Democrats narrowly lost major battles on how to spend the state's tobacco settlement money and on how much to spend for Gov. Jim Hodges' First Steps preschool program.

"How does this budget do anything but maintain the status quo?" Minority Leader Gilda Cobb-Hunter, D-Orangeburg, said in a scalding rebuke to the House.

On Wednesday, some House Democrats criticized Rep. Ted Brown, D-Georgetown, who earlier had voted against the governor's request for an additional \$10 million for First Steps.

In the flurry of amendments to the \$5.8 billion spending bill approved Wednesday, one provided \$500,000 for a health clinic in Brown's district. That caused some Democrats, who had fought for the extra First Steps funding, to question Brown's motives.

Many members wondered "why a particular member of this body would change their mind about a major policy initiative over a lunch hour about something as significant as the First Steps program," said Rep. Doug Jennings, D-Bennettsville. "I think that answer came today, and I think it stinks."

Brown said he made no deals to get the \$500,000 to create the Georgetown Choppee School Health Clinic and had been working on the project for six months.

Of the hundreds of votes taken on more than 720 amendments, last week's First Steps vote was

one of the tightest and highest-stakes. With Brown's vote, the extra First Steps money failed on a 62-60 vote.

However, one other Democrat voting against the amendment said he did so on a technical issue. Rep. Tim Wilkes, of Winnsboro, said his "no" vote allowed him to call for reconsideration of the vote at a later time and would give Democrats time to debate the issue.

In the end, it was to no avail as the budget bill passed without the additional funding for First Steps.

Across the hall, Senate Democrats, fearful of voting against tax cuts for older residents in an election year, went along with a Republican plan in a supplemental spending bill.

"We just caught the re-election virus," said Sen-

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ate President Pro Tem John Drummond, D-Ninety Six.

The amendment allots \$50 million to pay for an increase in property tax exemptions for elderly residents. The bill, which allocates money not included in the state budget bill, also will pay for \$5 million in improvements for coastal storm evacuation and nearly \$26 million for Medicaid shortfalls.

Debate was heated as Democrats demanded to know how Republicans would pay for the tax exemption increase.

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Justice opens probe of White House e-mails

BY LARRY MARGASAK
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — The Justice Department announced Thursday it has opened a criminal investigation into how the White House failed to review thousands of e-mails that may have been under subpoena. Lawyers divulged most of Vice President Al Gore's messages are among the missing.

The White House failure to archive vice presidential e-mails before 1997 means that most of Gore's electronic correspondence was never reviewed to determine whether some pieces should be turned over to investigators looking at Democratic fund-raising abuses.

"It appears that much, if not all" of Gore's e-mails were not captured by the White House archive system, White House counsel Beth Nolan informed Congress in a letter.

Nolan told lawmakers they are reviewing backup tapes from the vice presidential e-mail system to see if any of the e-mails can be reconstructed.

The archive failure was "the sole result of human mistakes and entirely unintentional," Nolan said, explaining that Gore's office simply used a different e-mail system that until 1997 could not be archived by the normal White House system.

"We have found no indication that those people producing documents (under subpoena) were aware of this problem," Nolan wrote.

But the House Government Reform Committee, which is investigating the e-mails, disclosed that current White House Chief of Staff John Podesta may have known about the e-mail glitch back in the summer of 1998 in the midst of the Lewinsky scandal.

The White House acknowledges that the glitches caused White House lawyers to fail to review thousands of messages to see if they were responsive to subpoenas and should have been turned over to Congress or criminal investigators from the many Clinton-era controversies. Some of the e-mails may be lost forever, aides said.

In a court filing, the Justice Department divulged it has opened a criminal investigation into the missing e-mails, and allegations by some White House contract workers that they were threatened by presidential aides never to disclose the problems to investigators.

The investigation will be conducted by the campaign fund-raising task force which had subpoenaed the e-mails as part of its overall investigation into fund-raising abuses in the 1996 election.

The dual developments Thursday added fresh fuel to a controversy that already has spilled into the presidential campaign. Republican George W. Bush raised the issue anew.

"This is a White House that needs to let the sunshine in when it comes to campaign-funding allegations," Bush said. "I look forward to seeing where those e-mails are, and what was in those e-mails."

The committee released a June 19, 1998 memo from a presidential aide to then-deputy chief of staff Podesta informing him of an "anomaly in the sys-

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tem involving the Mail2 server." They also released a handwritten note suggesting that Podesta asked an aide "to brief me on this."

Some private sector contract employees, who were hired by the White House to work on the e-mail system, contended they were threatened by White House officials with termination — and even prison — if they told anyone about the breakdown.

Investigators from independent councils to congressional committees all might have an interest in the missing e-mails, which could have been covered by subpoenas and document requests.

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Man shoots 4, kills himself

BY MEGAN K. STACK
ASSOCIATED PRESS

PASADENA, TEXAS — Esly Contreras was talking with her mother and pastor about how to stem the repeated advances from a suitor when the man burst into the church's office and opened fire, wounding the three and another parishioner before shooting himself in the head.

Oscar Castillo, 32, had been stalking 18-year-old Esly for weeks, her family said. Desperate to stop the come-ons and threats, mother and daughter went to their clergyman Wednesday night, her 15-year-old brother Robert said.

Esly was shot in the neck. Her mother, 38-year-old Angela Contreras, was seriously wounded, along with 43-year-old pastor Carlos Matamoros. Another parishioner, 32-year-old Jose Luis Dones,

was grazed by a bullet.

Castillo returned to the parking lot after the attack, stood beside his car and killed himself with a semiautomatic pistol.

Esly was in fair condition. Her mother, wounded in the abdomen, and Matamoros, shot in the chest, were in critical condition.

Castillo regularly donated his landscaping services to the church, said his boss, Camilo Barreda.

Castillo migrated north from Nicaragua years ago and ended up working landscape jobs near Houston. He battled drug addiction, acquaintances said, and eventually embraced Christianity.

Neighbor Michelle Martinez described the Contrerases as a loving, religious family. Angela emigrated from Honduras, divorced and raised her five

children by herself.

"As a mother, on a scale of one to 10, she's a 10," Martinez said.

An introspective, artistic young woman, Esly was scheduled to graduate from high school this spring.

"There's guys here that have crushes on her," Martinez said, gesturing toward the nearby apartments. "She doesn't give them the time of day. She just focuses on her education."

The courtyard was deserted Thursday, and Martinez stood crying by her door. Blocks away, in the parking lot outside the locked church, blood stains marked the concrete.

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12-year-old holds class at gunpoint

LISBON, OHIO (AP) — A 12-year-old who told authorities he wanted to be with his mother in jail briefly held his sixth-grade class at gunpoint Thursday before a teacher persuaded him to give up the weapon.

No one was hurt and no charges were immediately filed against the boy, who was taken into custody.

The boy said "his biological mother was in jail and he wanted to visit her, be with her," said Anthony Krukowski, superintendent of Lisbon schools.

Police did not immediately confirm whether the mother was in jail.

Death toll in Mozambique hits 640

XAI-XAI, MOZAMBIQUE (AP) — With gas in short supply Thursday, workers found their boat stalled and were forced to leave a body floating in waist-high water. The search for corpses came as the official death toll shot up to 640.

Mortuary workers continued to use boats as access roads remained washed away from massive flooding last month. The workers in the southern town of Xai-Xai were able to fish two corpses out of the muddy water in a back yard before they had to abandon their mission.

Those three were among the 640 that had been counted as of Thursday, said Antonio Macheve, a spokesman for the National Disaster Management Institute. The figure was expected to rise as the water recedes.

Plane lost power before fatal crash

Witnesses say a small plane that crashed just short of Columbia Owens Downtown Airport, killing one Midlands man and injuring another, apparently lost engine power before crashing in a wooded area near railroad tracks.

Charles W. Winter III, 53, of Irmo, died Wednesday night, Richland County Coroner Frank Barron said. William "Ray" Cooper, 42, of Columbia, was listed in critical condition at Palmetto Richland Memorial Hospital, Barron said.