

[Rhode Island news](#)

Unions: Gov. trying to scare older workers

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By Katherine Gregg

Journal State House Bureau

PROVIDENCE — Union leaders yesterday accused Governor Carcieri of trying to “frighten” 3,143 state workers eligible to retire into leaving state government before July 1 to avoid having to pay more — and in some cases, the full tab — for their post-retirement health coverage.

They hurled words such as “devastating” and “betrayal” at Carcieri’s attempts to cut the taxpayer cost of this retiree health benefit by \$9.8 million.

They described his proposal to allow state retirees to return to the state payroll without giving up their pensions — a practice that was outlawed in the early 1990s — as a thinly veiled attempt to head off chaos across state government if Carcieri drives state employees out in droves. Within the Department of Corrections alone, union chief Richard Ferruccio said 173 employees are now, or soon will be, eligible to retire, which would “create a very serious situation” at the state prison if they all left at once.

During a four-hour televised hearing by the House Finance Committee, union leaders also described as “repulsive” the Republican governor’s efforts to shut off a program that provides \$3,600 annual stipends — and free college tuition — to the families of police officers and firefighters who have been killed, injured on the job or stricken with cancer, to save another \$165,000.

The proposals were contained in the deficit-avoidance plan that Carcieri proposed last week in an attempt to plug a \$151-million hole in the current-year budget and lay the foundation for further cuts during the new fiscal year, which begins July 1 under the threat of a much larger potential deficit, estimated at somewhere between \$384 million and \$450 million.

While most of yesterday’s testimony centered on Carcieri’s attempts to cut employee benefits, the hearing also provided a forum for Carcieri’s top legal adviser, Kernan F. King, to argue for the repeal of what he characterized as an “anti-privatization” law passed last year.

Defenders say the new law simply requires the administration to do a detailed cost-benefit analysis before it hires a private company to do work now done by state employees, but King said the law would stretch a routine contract award out over three years and give new opportunities to sue to anyone potentially affected by a privatization.

“This legislation is a nightmare,” he told the lawmakers. “It will prevent a balanced budget. It will grind government to a halt and it will unleash an avalanche of litigation.”

“It would give anybody who’s under a drug-release program the opportunity to sue if they are getting treatment. It would give anybody at the ACI the opportunity to sue. It would give anybody at Zambarano hospital the opportunity to sue. It would give the fourth cousin of [Channel 10 reporter] Bill Rappleye the opportunity to sue, it is that broad”

Eventually, House Finance Committee Chairman Steven M. Costantino, D-Providence, cut him off, saying: “Can we reduce the hyperbole? Can we speak to the issues? I don’t think government is going to grind to a halt.”

King tried another tack. He likened the new law to Patriots coach Bill Belichick giving these instructions to quarterback Tom Brady for the Super Bowl: “You are going to have to wear a 20-pound brace on your left leg. You are going to have to throw not with your usual throwing arm, but the other one, and those four big guys who weigh about 300 pounds in front of you are not going to be there. Go Pats. Go win that game.”

But James Cenerini, lobbyist for Council 94, American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees, told the committee that “Carcieri’s track record on privatization does not warrant blind trust or a blank check.” He cited, as examples, the state Department of Transportation’s payment of the equivalent of \$102,000 a year to a typist provided by a private contractor, and the award of a state staffing contract worth up to \$11 million annually to Smart Staffing Service under terms that were not offered to any other potential bidders: the state agreed to front the company the money to meet each payroll in advance.

Responding to King’s suggestion that the legislature restore the status quo, Costantino said: “I am not sure if I have complete faith in that process, as much as you have.”

DOT union leader Brendan Fogarty said his department was considering privatizing its real estate and materials sections, but the idea was scrapped after his director, Jerome Williams, did the kind of detailed analysis the new law requires and determined there were “no savings to be found.”

Recasting King’s football analogy, he said: “We’re not asking Tom Brady to throw left-handed, and we’re not asking him to wear a 20-pound weight. We’re asking coach Belichick not to film the opposing coaches.”

No votes were taken yesterday as the committee attempted to slog through Carcieri’s much more complicated and far-reaching proposal to lower — and in some cases, eliminate — the state subsidy for post-retirement health benefits.

For starters, the administration wants to impose minimum age-and-work requirements for the health benefit. After June 30, a retiree would have to be at least 59 and have worked for the state at least 20 years to qualify for the benefit.

The current subsidy is keyed to how many years an employee has worked for the state. Longtime state workers pay nothing toward their post-retirement health care. Others with shorter work histories pay up to 50 percent of the rate the state is charged for an “active” employee. The state not only pays the other half, it also pays the difference between that rate and the higher rate the insurer is actually charging the state for this older and presumably sicker group. Carcieri wants eligible retirees to pay 20 percent of the actual premium cost.

Altogether, the state expects the two moves to shave \$9.8 million off the overall \$33.3-million cost of retiree health care.

Here’s what this would mean to the 60-year-old who retires after working for the state for 15 years: before July 1, this retiree would be required to pay \$2,714 for health coverage; after July 1, this employee would no longer qualify for a subsidy and would have to pay the full \$8,461 cost to the state of an individual plan.

For the 60-year-old who put in 28 years with the state, waiting to retire could make the difference between paying nothing under current rules and \$1,692 (which is 20 percent of that \$8,461) annually.

The move would also have implications for newly retired teachers, who are currently allowed to buy coverage at the reduced “active” rate, with the state paying the approximate \$3,000 difference between that and the actual cost.

State budget officer Rosemary Booth Gallogly told the lawmakers that the governor’s plan is aimed at bringing the benefits more in line with private industry, and starting to put enough money aside in a “trust fund” to make sure the state can keep its retiree health-care promises in the future.

Two recent studies show how increasingly rare, and costly, the benefit is. Retiree health care will cost state taxpayers \$700 million over the next 30 years, a tab that must be disclosed for the first time because of new accounting standards, according to a recent study produced by The Pew Charitable Trusts’ Center on the States.

Nationally, only 28 percent of employers were expected to offer traditional medical coverage to employees under age 65, and only 26 percent to those over 65 who retired last year, according to a survey by Watson Wyatt and the National Business Group on Health.

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At the Assembly

Facing the deficit: Cut Medicaid \$67 million

Nearly half of Governor Carcieri's proposed savings would come from diverting elderly and disabled Rhode Islanders away from nursing homes.

04:35 PM EST on Thursday, January 31, 2008

By Steve Peoples
Journal State House Bureau



Governor Carcieri presents his plan for Medicaid reduction at a State House news conference where all directors of the various departments for health and human services were present. The Providence Journal / Mary Murphy

PROVIDENCE — Governor Carcieri rolled out plans yesterday to transform care for the elderly in Rhode Island, a move he says could save state taxpayers tens of millions of dollars, but may force some nursing homes to close their doors.

The plan would begin diverting hundreds of seniors and disabled Rhode Islanders on Medicaid away from expensive institutional care as soon as July, pushing them to depend on visiting nurses, assisted-living situations, or even their families.

The Republican governor, speaking at a State House news conference just two days before the release of his 2008-09 budget plan, also highlighted proposals that would cut thousands from state welfare rolls, while discouraging “out-of-wedlock pregnancies” and encouraging two-parent families.

“We can disagree, but a family is a father and a mother nurturing their children and building a future for themselves,” Carcieri said, acknowledging that he couldn't force parents to stay together. “I think we can encourage them... You can set a tone and you try to teach people as to what's best.”

The governor's administration plans to work with faith-based institutions in the coming weeks to develop programs aimed at preserving two-parent families, but the budget measure isn't expected to generate any savings for the coming fiscal year.

Carcieri said his efforts to change the state's long-term care system, however, will save more than \$30 million next year. Overall, the Medicaid changes announced yesterday — which also include shifts in purchasing methods and reducing out-of-state placements for disabled children — could save taxpayers \$67 million (and another \$70 million in federal funds) next year, according to the governor's office.

Those savings don't include his plans to cut time limits for the Family Independence Program, commonly known as welfare, from five years to two years. Families won't be affected by the change until July 2009.

Carcieri's ambitious plans face hurdles.

The Democrat-dominated General Assembly must approve the proposals, which will be submitted as part of the governor's budget tomorrow. And they require the approval of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. The state has yet to apply for waivers with the federal agency, according to Department of Human Services Director Gary Alexander.

Carcieri's goal to transform long-term care in Rhode Island is not new.

Study groups for decades have promoted the benefits of a system that diverts the elderly and disabled away from costly institutional care to home-based care, which senior advocates say is the preference anyway. The General Assembly also adopted legislation last year to begin such a transition.

Carcieri said the state's looming budget deficit — projected at between \$384 and \$450 million next year — motivated his staff to act now.

"We've got to stop talking and do something. That's where we are today," he said.

Senior advocacy groups yesterday praised the governor's plans, but warned that community-based companies aren't yet prepared to handle a sudden influx of customers.

"It can only work here if the systems are in place prior to launch," said Donna Policastro, a member of the Senior Agenda Coalition and the executive director of the Rhode Island State Nurses Association.

She also worries that a statewide nursing shortage may complicate the governor's plans. "Who's going to take care of them?" she said.

To address a lack of community resources, the governor plans to pump \$7 million next year into the system. Among other things, the money will help boost reimbursement rates so that some companies can add staff.

“We will take care of these people, given the resources to do it,” said Robert J. Caffrey, president and chief executive officer of Homefront Health Care, one of about 60 companies in the Ocean State that provide in-home nursing care.

Carcieri maintains that his plan will save millions by simply making seniors and the disabled aware of their options.

The state will establish an assessment unit to work closely with seniors to ensure they are aware Medicaid covers visiting nursing care, adult daycare and assisted living, according to Alexander, of the DHS, which worked closely on the governor’s plan.

The department estimates that at least 100 seniors would leave nursing homes next year when notified of their options. And the department expects to divert 10 percent of Medicaid-eligible seniors entering the system away from institutional care next year.

Ultimately, Carcieri hopes to divert 50 percent of seniors entering the system away from nursing homes within the next five years.

For perspective, there were 11,754 Medicaid-eligible nursing home admissions last year among the state’s 86 nursing homes, according to the DHS. Among them, 6,500 seniors are currently housed in institutions.

It’s unclear how the nursing home industry will respond to a significant loss of patients.

“We would say this is an opportunity for nursing homes to change the way they do business,” Alexander said. “If they happen to close as part of the market forces, I don’t think we’re saying that we’re going to bail them out.”

The head of the Rhode Island Health Care Association acknowledged the governor’s plan may cause “financial strain” on her industry and emphasized the role nursing homes play in Rhode Island.

“People are not being forced into nursing homes because they need reminders to take care of their pills,” said Virginia Burke, president of the health-care association. “The governor seems to have the impression that there’s a large population of people living in nursing homes that could be readily cared for at home, and that’s just not the case.”

In last week’s State of the State speech, however, the governor cited data collected by the Kaiser Family Foundation that show 5.2 percent of Rhode Island seniors were nursing home residents in 2005, a number that is among the highest in the nation.

Meanwhile, the governor yesterday also highlighted plans to cut welfare benefits for all families that have exceeded the state's five-year limit. An estimated 3,400 children are among the group, according to the DHS.

Most welfare recipients in Rhode Island are single mothers, a fact that the governor noted on talk radio in November.

Carcieri said the government can offer incentives that would encourage two-parent families, a move that would likely reduce dependency on welfare benefits and other social programs.

Linda Katz, policy director for the Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College, said the governor's perspective is skewed.

"He's got a very '50s model of what a family looks like with mom home cooking the meals while dad goes off to the job. Then you don't have to pay for childcare, mom's home raising the kids," she said. "I think his vision doesn't meet the economic realities of the state."

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State Government

Carcieri relies on spending cuts, fees to close budget deficit

04:53 PM EST on Friday, February 1, 2008

By STEVE PEOPLES, CYNTHIA NEEDHAM and KATHERINE GREGG

Journal State House Bureau

PROVIDENCE -- Governor Carcieri released a \$6.88 billion spending plan today that seeks to close the largest budget deficit in nearly two decades by cutting millions from the state's public college system, diverting hundreds of elderly, disabled and neglected children away from residential programs on a voluntary basis, and freezing state education aid to cities and towns.

The governor's 2008-09 budget also dramatically reduces eligibility for the state's welfare and subsidized health care programs, replaces hundreds of state employees with private contractors, and allows more than 200 prisoners to leave the Adult Correctional Institutions early.

Facing a deficit estimated by the administration at \$384 million, the governor's budget officer Rosemary Booth Gallogly said every effort was made "to share the pain." Virtually every state department was targeted.

And Carcieri stood fast by his pledge not to raise taxes. The spending plan relies heavily on spending cuts to balance the budget, which is required in the state constitution.

Carcieri rolled out a handful of proposals to raise fees like creating tickets for drivers who talk on cell phones, but avoided oft-discussed moves such as selling the Ocean State's bridges, privatize its lottery system, or expand gambling at the state's slot parlors.

The release of the Republican governor's budget marks the beginning of a process that will unfold over the next five months as the Democrat-dominated General Assembly debates the spending plan for the fiscal year that begins July 1. Ultimately, the legislators have the constitutional power to decide whether to accept Carcieri's proposals or not.

Separately, the Assembly will debate a mid-year budget revision aimed at closing a \$151-million deficit by the end of June. That proposal would require all state employees to take off six unpaid days in the next five months and includes a mid-year \$12.7 million cut in non-school municipal aid for cities and towns.

The 2008-09 budget released by the governor today, however, doesn't include specifics like furlough days, but assumes \$60.6 million in "personnel savings that are currently being discussed with union leadership." Carcieri's staff would not be more specific.

A glum Dan Beardsley, director of the Rhode Island League of Cities and Towns, described a budget briefing held yesterday as "sadder than a wake at Nardolillo's funeral home."

Staring at aid cuts for the second year in a row, he said: "The governor is again proposing the same, and in my opinion, outrageous fiscal policy of transferring the state's fiscal problems to the cities and towns."

A handful of lawmakers who had been briefed on the 180-page budget summary said they had serious concerns about whether the governor's plans were realistic, as many require cooperation from federal authorities, the court system, labor unions, and even the elderly and disabled people who would be affected.

"[The governor] puts out numbers that aren't facts," said Rep. Thomas Slater, D-Providence, a member of the powerful House Finance Committee. "I don't think they're real."

Specifically, the governor has proposed saving more than \$66.7 million by reducing Medicaid spending, largely by diverting seniors and disabled adults out of nursing homes to non-residential programs in the community, or back to live with their families.

The governor says the diversions would be voluntary, but he needs more than 200 seniors, 300 youths in the child welfare system, and enough developmentally disabled Rhode Islanders to fill as many as 25 group homes to leave residential care next year to meet his budget targets.

Carcieri has said nobody will be forced to leave a nursing home, or prevented from entering a nursing home. But he has not yet spelled out his plan for cutting the numbers of nursing home residents to cut costs. In fact, a budget briefing book supplied by the administration contains a one-page "placeholder" for what the administration says it will introduce later: a comprehensive "Medicaid Reform Plan."

The Medicaid changes require waivers from the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. Carcieri's staff said earlier in the week that they hadn't yet applied for the waivers.

Overall, the governor's spending plan cuts state spending (not including federal dollars) from the \$3.4 billion total adopted by the General Assembly for this fiscal year to \$3.27 billion for the coming fiscal year.

For the first time since the early 1990s, the proposal would cut -- rather than raise -- the state-funded portion of the budget by \$130.9 million (3.8 percent) from this year's budgeted level.

And it's possible that the General Assembly may have to go further. State revenues like sales and income taxes are directly tied to the health of the economy. A further economic downturn could increase the size of the deficit that must be filled. Fiscal experts will gather in May to revise that estimate.

Highlights of cuts and savings

02:26 PM EST on Friday, February 1, 2008

Cuts and savings proposed by the governor in his spending plan for fiscal year 2008-09 include:

- Cutting eligibility for the state's subsidized health care program, RIte Care, for parents with incomes from 185 percent of the federal poverty level (\$32,560 for a family of three) to 133 percent (\$23,408 for a family of three). An estimated 7,396 adults would be affected.
- Cutting eligibility for the state's welfare program, known as the Family Independence Program, from five years to two years. The change wouldn't be enforced until July 2009.
- Freezing state education aid at current levels for almost all school districts.
- Cutting non-school municipal aid by \$12.7 million as was recommended in the governor's mid-year spending revision plan.
- Saving \$3.7 million by reducing 300 children from the child welfare system's residential placements, including 60 children currently housed in out-of-state programs.
- Savings of more than \$1 million through a series of "good time" provisions that would allow hundreds of prisoners to leave the Adult Correctional Institutions early. The plan would give well-behaved prisoners, with the exception of sexual offenders, the chance to slice 10 days per month off their sentences. Corrections Director A.T. Wall said the early-release plan, if approved, will reduce the daily prison population by about 211 next year.
- Approximately \$60.6 million in savings through personnel reductions (aside from the governor's previously-announced layoffs). The governor's staff would not detail how he would achieve the savings and the union leadership says the plans are subject to the collective bargaining process. Most of the major state employees' union contracts expire at the end of June.

- Cuts to community service grants such as the Rhode Island Meals on Wheels (\$201,400), Rhode Island Historical Society (\$135,132), the Diocese of Providence (\$151,867), Crossroads Rhode Island (\$225,000), Rhode Island Community Food Bank (\$192,000), Providence WaterFire (\$150,000), and Rhode Island Legal Services (\$135,000).

-- Steve Peoples, Journal State House Bureau

[Rhode Island news](#)

House passes \$6.89-billion state budget

08:25 AM EDT on Thursday, June 19, 2008

By Steve Peoples and CYNTHIA NEEDHAM

Journal State House Bureau

PROVIDENCE — Struggling to close a \$425-million shortfall for the budget year that begins in just two weeks, the state House of Representatives battled late into the night on the merits of a \$6.89-billion spending package that includes dramatic cuts to Rhode Island's programs for the elderly, poor and disabled.

Nine hours after the debate began, lawmakers unanimously approved the massive plan, while resisting calls to raise taxes. They increased local education assistance for cities and towns, but cut non-education aid. And they OK'd \$90 million in cuts to the state's work force, despite not knowing how the savings would be achieved.

But the most heated debate was reserved for an odd collection of issues: illegal immigration, movies and alternative schools.

Even a modest proposal to allow motorists to use headphones drew more discussion than millions of dollars in cuts to organizations such as Meals on Wheels, the Rhode Island Community Food Bank and the state's largest homeless shelter, Crossroads Rhode Island.

House Finance Committee Chairman Steven M. Costantino shrugged in disbelief over the lack of debate over sweeping changes that would affect tens of thousands of low-income Rhode Islanders.

Political observers weren't surprised, given the state's situation.

Even if legislators wanted to reverse the cuts, there simply weren't many popular alternatives as the state trudges through its worst fiscal mess since the credit-union crisis of the early 1990s.

“House Democrats and House Republicans all realize that this is the best budget that they could have possibly put together,” said Daniel Beardsley, executive director of the Rhode Island League of Cities and Towns, one of the many lobbyists watching the debate from the public gallery high above the House chamber.

Indeed, lawmakers couldn’t recall another budget vote that passed without a single “No” vote. The enormity of the challenge brought political alliances together like never before, according to Costantino.

“We are in very difficult times. We walk outside this building, we feel it, we see it, we touch it, we experience it,” he said. “With this budget we have demonstrated the resolve to tackle the issues of these tough times.”

The Senate is expected to approve the state budget later today. The tax-and-spend plan will become law short of a gubernatorial veto, which is not expected.

“This budget represents a watershed moment in the recent history of Rhode Island state government,” Governor Carcieri said in a statement released after midnight. “In the face of a severe fiscal crisis, we have worked together to reduce spending and balance the budget without raising taxes.”

The early hours of last night’s session were dominated by fiery debate over a one-sentence amendment from Rep. Peter Palumbo.

The Cranston Democrat sought to prevent undocumented pregnant women from qualifying for the state’s subsidized health insurance program, RIte Care.

The proposal was a last attempt to crack down on immigration in a session that saw more than a dozen such bills unveiled and then left in limbo.

Majority Leader Gordon D. Fox implored his fellow legislators to think of the children affected by the proposed policy change. Denying their mothers access to the free prenatal care that now exists for all income-eligible women, regardless of immigration status, could endanger the health of American-born babies and cost the state millions down the road, he said.

Though representatives ultimately sided with Fox, several said Cumberland Rep. Richard Singleton stole the spotlight, speaking fervently of his impoverished upbringing in a Boston neighborhood. Today in Rhode Island, there are thousands of young families struggling to do the same, he said.

“Whether you’re a Democrat or you’re a Republican should not make a bit of difference,” Singleton pleaded with fellow lawmakers. “It should be that you’re an American. And yes, as an American, I’m angry that there are benefits given to non-Americans over and above those who are American. If that makes me a bigot, well I’m a bigot.”

Protesters waving signs that read things like, “Tax cuts for the rich, budget cuts for the rest,” greeted legislators as they entered the House chamber yesterday afternoon.

But the Assembly resisted calls to reverse tax breaks aimed at high earners, such as the capital gains tax and flat tax alternative. They also left alone the state’s income and sales taxes.

Lawmakers did, however, include a proposal to raise \$5.6 million by increasing the tax on medical and dental premiums from 1.1 to 1.4 percent. The increase would be borne by the major insurers, Blue Cross, United and Delta Dental, but may result in higher medical costs if the companies pass the increase on to consumers as they have in the past.

But it was the movies, not health-care costs that drew fire last night.

Despite cries from Republicans to leave the state’s fledgling movie-production tax credit program on the cutting room floor, lawmakers ultimately agreed to cap the film credits at \$15 million per year, to be doled out on a first-come basis to production companies that spend money making movies in the Ocean State.

The vote came after more than an hour of insults slung from both sides of the aisle in a sometimes comic, sometimes angry debate that some might call fit for a Hollywood script.

House Minority Leader Nicholas Gorham chastised legislators for their so-called obsession with the big screen, while Speaker William Murphy, armed at the rostrum with a lunar calendar, accused Gorham of “barking at the moon.”

Those who favor the movie productions lamented the probable loss of film business to neighboring states and said the change would put the much-touted plan to build a movie studio in jeopardy.

While some subjects saw debates as intense as they were long-winded, others saw no discussion at all.

A massive 103-page plan to transform the state’s welfare and Medicaid programs received virtually no debate, despite months of work from House leadership and the governor’s office. That might have been because the rank and file didn’t have time to read it.

Most legislators received a final draft of plans just minutes before yesterday’s vote

Linda Katz, policy director for Rhode Island’s Poverty Institute, said it was “disheartening” that lawmakers adopted the major changes “so radically with so little discussion.”

The plan cuts eligibility for cash assistance, known as welfare, from a five-year lifetime limit to four years. Recipients would be allowed only two consecutive years of welfare in any five-year period.

The proposal also allows Carcieri to pursue a “global Medicaid waiver” from the federal government. The state would receive broad authority to reshape Medicaid programs, but only after agreeing to cap spending on programs for the elderly, poor and disabled for the next five years.

Rhode Island would be the first state in the nation to be granted such a waiver. The compromise legislation adopted last night would allow the Assembly to block any proposed Medicaid changes within 30 days after being proposed by the Carcieri administration.

Advocates for the elderly embrace changes that would divert people away from nursing homes, but warn of waiting lists for the elderly, reduced access to in-home care, and cuts to transportation programs for medical appointments.

The Assembly’s budget anticipates saving \$67 million by instituting the changes. Some doubt that the savings are realistic.

“There are concerns making the savings proposed in the operating budget, but this is a very good first step,” said John C. Simmons, head of the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council.

And there were a slew of provisions that drew little attention last night but had broad implications for different groups across the state.

A plan to cut \$12.5 million in non-school aid from cities and towns sailed to passage with no changes and no comments from lawmakers, all of whose communities would be affected by the change.

Legislators seemed similarly poised late last night to vote through a plan to allocate up to \$12.8 million next year in gambling money to local school districts. But that aid is contingent on new revenues from overnight gambling at Twin River and there’s no guarantee that money will materialize.

Similarly, there was virtually no discussion on a provision to cut \$17 million from the state’s three public universities and \$2.6 million from the agency that gives need-based college scholarships.

Meanwhile, after a heated debate, representatives voted to prohibit municipal health-care contracts from specifying a health-insurance provider.

Supporters of a plan to create a new class of public schools — known as mayoral academies — watched nervously from the gallery high above the House floor for more

than two hours as legislators dissected their plan to build a school free from union provisions.

Several seats away, labor leaders for the state's teachers' unions who have criticized the plan for gutting teacher protections waited with a very different set of hopes.

Lawmakers ultimately approved the mayoral academy, rejecting a proposal to reverse some of the freedoms for the proposed school. "In a lot of ways, public education got a big win tonight," said the bill's architect, Cumberland Mayor Daniel J. McKee.

Meanwhile, with the Senate refusing to act on a House-passed bill requiring lawmakers to share the cost of their 100-percent state-paid health insurance premiums, Republicans tried to get their colleagues to put the requirement in the state budget.

"If you don't want to be hypocrites," House Minority Leader Robert Watson, R-East Greenwich, said: "you have to support this amendment. But the proposal was tabled instead on a 43-to-26 vote at the request of House Majority Whip Peter Kilmartin. When legislators finally approved the budget after 11:30 p.m., wary observers said they were just glad it was over in such a tough year.

"Overall it's been an incredibly frustrating year," said Robert A. Walsh, executive director of the National Education Association of Rhode Island. "This is a very tough budget and a lot of people that we care deeply about have been hurt by it. We certainly see the big picture of the fiscal situation in this state, but honestly, we would have done it differently."

With reports from Journal State House reporter Katherine Gregg

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