TALLAHASSEE — State lawmakers began the legislative session pledging their commitment to Florida's higher education system, calling it the source of the "intellectual capital'' needed to strengthen the ailing economy.

But as the House and Senate debated their proposed budgets Thursday, it became clear that the cooperative spirit on community colleges and universities has vanished.

Now, higher education spending is a central sticking point between the two chambers. Compared to the Senate, the House proposes spending $460 million less — making education spending overall the biggest difference in expenditures between the two chambers, which are also deeply divided over which taxes and fees to raise.

"In the end, someone's got to ask the question of, 'Where's the support for higher education?' " said University of Florida president Bernie Machen. "We believe we are going to see a significant base cut."

UF would lose $50 million from its base budget under the Senate plan and $108 million under the House plan. To that end, Machen on Thursday released a "worst-case scenario" plan for budget cuts totaling $108 million. It would mean nearly 400 faculty and staff layoffs, shorter summer work weeks, the end of benefits like sick leave and vacation time, and the elimination of programs including educational psychology, religion and geological sciences.

Earlier this week, Florida State University president T.K. Wetherell released a similar plan for $73 million in cuts that would close 21 degree programs and even the Panama City campus.

Hanging in the balance: the fate of hundreds of education employees … and the entire budget. Any budget disagreement that can't be resolved by House and Senate leaders could scuttle the entire spending plan.

That could send the Legislature into overtime, lead to contentious special lawmaking sessions or ultimately interrupt programs for thousands of Floridians who depend on government spending.

The differences between the two chambers were on display Thursday as the Senate took up its $65.6 billion budget, debated it and rolled out with a unanimous 39-0 vote. While in the House, agonizing and partisan warfare ruled the day.

And differences aren't just a matter of style either. The dollar differences between the budget plans themselves are rather large. Consider:

• Overall, the Senate spends nearly $547 million more than the House, which proposes spending a total of $65.1 billion next budget year beginning July 1.

• The House takes nearly $1 billion from special accounts called "trust funds," with major raids on funds that help build roads and keep groundwater clean. The Senate takes only about $63 million from trust funds.

• The House raises more than $1 billion in fees. The Senate: $636 million.

• Compared to the House, the Senate takes more gambling money and is pushing for a cigarette tax that could raise about $900 million. The House, at least for now, has no cigarette tax.

Senator Jeff Atwater met with university leaders earlier this week and reiterated his belief that the strength of Florida's economy hinges on investments in universities.

But university leaders say the real indicator of lawmakers' commitment will be reflected in the budget lawmakers pass this session.

"Cutting universities is not a good economic recovery strategy for the state of Florida," said Stephen Sauls, lobbyist for Florida International University, which enrolls 38,000 students in South Florida.

"This is a regressive response," said University of South Florida Provost Ralph Wilcox. "We've got to find a way to educate ourselves into a stronger economy. Slicing into universities is not going to help."

The Senate proposes spending $3.5 billion for state universities, $297 million more than the House. The Senate's community college budget is also $162 million more than the House's proposal of $910 million.

"This is a budget conference issue, and hopefully we find a middle point," said Rep. Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel. "The good news is, we can only go up from here."

Already, institutions have made cuts — some painful. Enrollment has largely been frozen statewide. Centers and institutions have been merged or shut down. Some employees were laid off.

Universities cut library hours. FIU went to a four-day work week last summer to save utility costs. The university also closed its industrial engineering degree program.

"That was a very popular program," Sauls said. "It was painful to watch."

FIU would lose another $43 million under the House proposal and more than $16-million under the Senate plan. USF would lose $38 million under the Senate plan and under the House plan, $78 million — a few million more than the annual budget of USF's liberal arts college. That's on top of the $52 million in cuts USF sustained over the past year.

"If this is the magnitude of cuts we see, it will mean layoffs and program closures and reduction in services," Wilcox said. "It would be devastating."

Weatherford is sponsor of the bill that allows all 11 state universities to raise additional revenue through a higher "differential" tuition for undergraduates. Universities say the measure is long overdue, but because of provisions that phase in the tuition and exempt some students, the impact of the new revenue won't really kick in for several years. And they need money now.

Presidents also are reluctant to include federal stimulus money in their budget plans for the next two years, because they can't fund degree programs and tenured professor salaries on money that runs out in two years.

"It's a lifesaver, but only in the short run," said Machen. "I can't build my budget on that. It's one-time money."

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