Florida university presidents decry budget cuts

The Associated Press

Ten of Florida's 11 public university presidents converged Thursday on the Capitol to protest budget cuts they fear could ruin the state's higher education standing.

They said in the worst possible case, the proposed cuts would force them to shut down a number of programs and further stifle the lagging economy by throwing some of the State University System's 45,000 employees out of work.

The House of Representatives is considering an estimated half billion dollars in cutbacks from the universities' budgets in the fiscal year starting July 1. The Senate version would lop away about half that much, although both chambers would replace at least some of those dollars through tuition increases.

"If some of the worse scenarios that are being played out come to pass this is Armageddon for the State University System," Florida International University President Mitch Maidique said.

"It takes generations to build universities, but they can be destroyed in a very short time," Maidique said during a news conference.

The presidents also met briefly with Gov. Charlie Crist and said he was very supportive of their effort to call attention to their budget concerns.

Crist told them the Legislature could help ease the budget cuts to the universities by approving a gaming compact with the Seminole Indian Tribe.

"The federal stimulus and the money from the Seminole tribe, I think both of these should give us cause for hope," Crist said.

The House proposal is more draconian, the presidents said.

It has appropriated $4.1 billion for community colleges and universities. That's a 4 percent cut and $459 million less than appropriated by the Senate, which would leave their budgets virtually unchanged from the current year.

Both plans include base tuition increases - 8 percent in the Senate and 7 percent in the House. Both also assume lawmakers will pass a bill letting state universities further ease tuition up to a total of 15 percent and that all 11 schools would approve the full amount.

Frank Brogan, president of Florida Atlantic University, was the only one of the state's public university presidents who missed the gathering. He was attending a funeral.