

President's budget: misplaced priorities

By U.S. Rep. Mike Michaud
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Each year on the first Tuesday of February, the President submits his budget to Congress. The budget submission is usually followed by committee hearings starring Administration officials who provide budget justifications to Members of Congress.

The budget serves as a statement of our national priorities. It is a way for the President to demonstrate his vision for the year ahead. It should also serve as a roadmap for fiscal responsibility and economic growth in the future. Every American household needs to live within a budget, and the federal government should have to as well.

It is no secret that I have disagreed with significant portions of the Administration's past budget submissions. For seven years, this President has offered budgets that have set record deficits and shifted greater financial burdens on hardworking Americans. Unfortunately, this year's submission follows that trend. It would simultaneously create the third largest single year deficit in our nation's history and shortchange a number of important programs. The Chairman of the Budget Committee, John Spratt, put it well when he said that the budget before us seems to bear all the hallmarks of previous budgets, like "more deficits, more debt, offset by draconian cuts in Medicare and Medicaid, and smaller but significant cuts in such things as the Social Services Grant and the Community Services Block Grant."

The President's budget also makes specific cuts to programs important to Maine. It cuts the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and Weatherization Assistance Program. These two programs provide critical assistance to many low income Mainers struggling to deal with freezing temperatures and rising fuel costs. I will strongly oppose these cuts and instead support significant funding increases so that no Mainer is left in the cold.

The President's budget also essentially eliminates the Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP), cutting funding by \$87 million below the level needed to maintain current services and providing only \$4 million for 2009. MEP provides resources and services to U.S. manufacturers to help create jobs, leverage private-sector investment, and be more competitive. As our economy slows, we should not be cutting funding to programs that create jobs. In fact, we need to be doing everything we can to create and sustain jobs, especially in the manufacturing sector. This is not a cut that would be good for Maine, especially given the recent layoffs and plant closers.

The Administration's budget also cuts funding for programs that help cities and states like Maine fight terrorism and fund important education and early literacy programs. I will work with my colleagues to see that our budget does not abandon these important local initiatives.

But even though these budget cuts are being touted as fiscally responsible, they do little to realistically get our fiscal house back in order. Under this Administration, the national deficit has grown by \$3.4 trillion to record levels. The President's budget submission projects a deficit for fiscal year 2009 of \$407 billion, but projects

a surplus in 2012. I support the President's determination to get back into the black, but the budget projections are based on several unrealistic premises including: cuts in the growth of Medicare and Medicaid by \$195.7 billion over five years; only spending \$70 billion more in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2009 (and not a dollar more in the future), which seems very unlikely; and allowing the Alternative Minimum Tax to impact an ever expanding group of taxpayers.

There are portions of the President's budget that I do support. The Administration has ranked the Machias River Project as its number one Forest Legacy project. This project supports the combined goals of habitat preservation, maintenance of working forests, and recreational access. And the Administration's request for veterans' health care funding appears to be a good starting point for us to build on.

In the end, budgets reflect priorities. We must invest in the future of our country, support economic growth and address our huge deficit. At this point, however, I do not think that the President's budget plan gets us there, but by working together on a bipartisan basis, we can make the tough decisions necessary to get our country back on the right track.

