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Editorial: Lawmakers have much work to do to fix Michigan

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Lawmakers returning to Lansing this week should dig right into pending legislation for making Michigan better. With a \$1.8 billion budget shortfall looming, there isn't time for the traditional period of lax activity while awaiting Gov. Jennifer Granholm's State of the State address, scheduled this year for Feb. 3.

Legislators can start with important proposals for the retooling of state government that have been put off for too long. Then they could move from those to other worthwhile measures, such as dumping the Michigan Business tax surcharge and improving legal representation for poor people charged with crimes.

Ideas that should be given priority include:

- House Speaker Andy Dillon's plan to save up to \$900 million by pooling health insurance coverage for all public employees and schoolteachers. Some argue that the savings wouldn't be as great as have been claimed, but it's a worthwhile pursuit for even half the estimated amount. Granholm has said there would be an initial cost and savings wouldn't be realized right away. But that shouldn't be used as a reason not to adopt this fiscally responsible reform.
- A proposal to require public workers to pay 20 percent of their health care costs -- or 15 percent if their health plan includes wellness incentives and employee-funded health savings accounts. This overdue legislation would more closely match public benefits with those for private-sector workers and help governments and school boards wipe out budget deficits. A U.S. Labor Department report indicates Michigan civil service workers currently pay less than 10 percent of their health care premiums, while private workers pay 20 percent to 30 percent.
- Legislation to restore the concept of using "good time" to reduce prison sentences. Lawmakers have made important changes in parole policies that have helped stem the costly increase in Michigan's prison population, but the Corrections budget still verges on \$2 billion and is unaffordable. Organizations such as the Detroit Regional Chamber have noted that the state could save another \$400 million by adopting Corrections policies more like those of neighboring states and the federal government.
- The state may not be able to afford all of what's laid out in a bill calling for a state-run system of legal defense for the indigent, but lawmakers should do all they can to improve on the current patchwork setup, run and funded by counties, that deprives many criminal defendants of their rights. Certainly, for example, they can pass new state standards for who's entitled to public defenders and assure those facing the most serious charges are represented by the most-skilled court-appointed lawyers.
- Legislation to phase out the 22 percent surcharge on the Michigan Business Tax by the end of 2011. While some would say state government can't afford this drop in revenue, it's really a matter of setting priorities and being willing to adopt the cost-saving reforms that have been proposed. A business tax reduction right now could spur Michigan's rebound from recession.

The projected \$1.8 billion budget problem is going to require a lot of attention this spring. There's no time to waste and no need to wait for the governor's message.

Michiganians already know what the state of our state is.