

OPINION

OUR VIEWS

Think beyond the recession

Speaking to the Press Club of Baton Rouge, Eddie Ashworth said he could think of no better source material than New York Times columnist Bob Herbert, who recently wrote about budget problems affecting states across the country.

As director of the Louisiana Budget Project, which is sponsored by the Louisiana Association of Nonprofit Organizations, Ashworth studies Louisiana's state budget and how it affects moderate- to low-income families.

Ashworth pointed to Herbert's column, titled "An Invitation to Disaster," as a reminder that Louisiana's budget woes are shared by many other states weathering the effects of the recession.

"The states are in the worst fiscal shape since the Depression," Herbert told readers. "The Great Recession has caused state tax revenues to fall off a cliff. Some states — New York and California quickly come to mind — are facing prolonged budget nightmares. Across the country, critical state services are being chopped like firewood. More cuts are coming. Taxes and fees are being raised. Yet the budgets in dozens and dozens of states remain drastically out of balance."

We believe Ashworth is on the right track in considering Louisiana's budget crisis in relation to what's going on beyond Louisiana. States live or die by how they compete with their neighbors, and Louisiana's current state budget problems are compounded by deeper challenges that existed before the recession.

For years, Louisiana has lagged other states in the education and health of its people. How Louisiana addresses its current budget problems will affect how it competes with other states long after the recession is over.

Without the right budget choices, "we will impede our ability to grow when the budget improves," Ashworth told the Press Club.

Ashworth suggested a mix of budget cuts and tax measures to balance Louisiana's state budget without dramatically compromising help for the poor, the sick and the elderly. He also suggested the governor and lawmakers revisit Louisiana's long list of tax exemptions, some of which seem questionable.

So far, Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal has opposed any new taxes, regardless of the state's budget problems.

"We're at the crossroads," Ashworth said. "Do we maintain this ideological purity, or do we work together?"

Each day brings fresh news of the consequences of Louisiana's state budget problems. The latest round of cuts at the Louisiana Department of Education includes reduced funding for a reading program that, according to state Superintendent Paul Pastorek, is a key to improving student achievement. LSU, which barely achieved top-tier status in a national ranking of colleges and universities, could now lose that status as a result of budget cuts. Meanwhile, cuts in the state health-care budget could mean closed hospitals and substantially reduced services.

All of this means Louisiana, already struggling to compete nationally and internationally, could emerge from this recession dumber and sicker than before the recession struck.

Is this any way to build a future for our children?