 Agencies explore layoff avoidance

By BILL McMAHON
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With budget cuts a likely product of the legislative session, state agencies are considering layoff avoidance plans, Civil Service Director Herb Sumrall said.

Employees of the Department of Civil Service used the nine-hour, four-day work week to avoid layoffs in 1986, Sumrall said.

The uncertainty of the budget is such that the July 1 fiscal year will almost be upon agency heads before they know whether there will be a budget cut, Sumrall said.

It would be difficult to get a layoff plan together upon such short notice, he said.

Because of that, agency heads are looking at layoff avoidance plans rather than at layoffs, he said.

One of those agencies is the Department of Health and Hospitals.

Because the agency has many 24-hour facilities, it needs “careful planning so we don’t hurt people,” DHH Deputy Secretary Rose Forest said.

The department is looking at layoff avoidance plans, cutting spending and reducing contracts, she said.

Because of the Administrative Procedures Act, it takes from 30 to 60 days to cut programs, she said. So plans have to be made now in anticipation of what the budget might be, she said.

Emily Thornton, deputy assistant secretary, said the
Office of Family Support already has a freeze on hiring.

At the direction of Howard Prejean, the assistant secretary, the office has also put a freeze on travel, said Thornton.

The proposed budget will not support the present employment in the office, she said, and the agency is hoping that layoffs can be avoided through attrition.

The office “is taking a very conservative approach” on spending, she said.

Her office is not looking at four-day work weeks as are some agencies, she said. “It would be difficult to do a four-day work week.”

Clients of the office include food stamp recipients and those receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children, so “it would be very difficult to close our office,” she said.

The Department of Agriculture, which has furloughed employees three different times in recent years to balance the budget, is cutting spending but isn’t considering layoffs, said department spokesman Larry Michaud.

“We’ve not gotten to that point,” he said. “We’re reducing services and reducing programs.”

Don Hutchinson, undersecretary in the Department of Economic Development, said the staff there has been told about the potential for layoffs, though nothing has been drawn up specifically on a layoff program, he said.

The department is waiting to see what the budget bill will contain when it comes out of the House Appropriations Committee.

Plans will have to be made then, he said, “because you can’t come in one day and say... you are laid off.”

Because of length of service considerations and job descriptions, there could be a lot of shifting of employees within the department if layoffs occur, and that takes time, he said.

Jude Patin, secretary of the Department of Transportation and Development, said his agency is making no plans for employee reductions.

The department’s operations are mostly financed by a trust account funded from gasoline and special fuels taxes.

“We must manage within the trust fund,” Patin said.