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WKU's Board of Regents discuss legislative session, budget in committee meetings

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com Jan 26, 2018

Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni said that it's "almost impossible" to close a \$15 million budget shortfall without any job loss.

Speaking in an interview after a Board of Regents meeting, Caboni said a hiring chill the university put into place last fall will likely not be enough to manage the mounting funding reductions WKU faces.

"With a \$15 million gap, it would be almost impossible to close that without any job loss," he said. "One of the reasons we put the hiring slowdown into place this fall was to create through attrition (job) vacancies, and we've done that but I think we probably have not done that quickly enough to be able to create enough vacancies to manage through all the reductions. And so that means in addition to programs they'll be, I think, jobs on the table. I don't have any specifics yet."

Caboni added that he's charged WKU's Budget Council with bringing the university's budget in line with revenue realities.

"We're likely to hear back from them in February," he said.

Caboni's comments came after several Board of Regents committee meetings took up much of the day Friday.

Board members heard several presentations, including an update on state budget and legislative developments that could affect the university and what the university is doing to improve its recruiting, marketing and retention efforts.

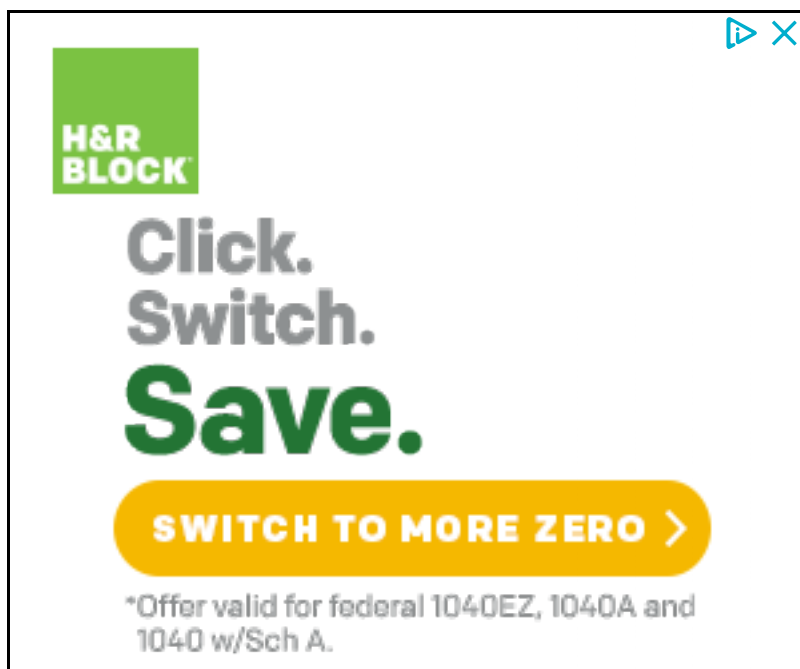
On top of the \$15 million shortfall, Caboni has also said the university is aware of an additional charge as high as \$9 million for one of the university's pensions.

In his budget address last week, Gov. Matt Bevin proposed a 6.25 percent budget cut across most of state government, which would translate to another \$4.6 million for WKU.

The Kentucky Mesonet, a network of weather stations managed at WKU, is also among a list of 70 programs that would see their funding eliminated. The Mesonet receives \$750,000 for its budget.

Robbin Taylor, WKU's vice president of public affairs, noted in an update on state government developments that many of the programs at risk are from higher education institutions. They include a teacher scholarship program and a work-study program, among others, she said.

"They affect the university, but who they really affect is students," she said.



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Bevin has also proposed a \$300 million bond pool for preserving university facilities. Taylor told board members that officials are investigating how to use that. Over the two-year life of the budget, she said universities would have to match each dollar they receive through the pool and match 60 percent in the second year.

Responding to a question from Regent John Ridley about the need for tax reform and additional revenue to fund state government, Taylor said she's seen "no indication" that it will be taken up this legislative session.

Regarding a solution to the state's troubled pension system, Taylor said WKU has been asking lawmakers for stability and predictability for pension liabilities.

President Caboni was in Frankfort this week and will be there again next week to explain to lawmakers how WKU is being affected by these developments.

During the meeting Friday, Caboni said one-on-one relationships with lawmakers will be the university's best hope for minimizing the scope of reductions.

Following the meeting, Caboni told the Daily News that his visit this week consisted of advocating for the stable and predictable funding from the state.

"If you can't count on a stable revenue stream or a stable cost of benefits, it makes it impossible to plan for the long term," he said, adding lawmakers were friendly to WKU. "We're at the beginning of what is a long process and moving toward some conclusion as I understand it in mid-April."

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