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Coming up short. . .

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The state budget passed by the North Carolina Senate cuts into the bone of needed programs, does little if anything to stem long-term budget problems, and is a textbook example of what happens when legislators bow to what they see as self-preservation. It is the work of politicians who seem to fear, more than anything, a defeat on election day -- a fear that has smothered notions of new revenues.

What a dismal document: If the House goes along, the overall public school budget will be cut, without an expansion of Governor Easley's class-size reductions in kindergartens. One wonders how that will play with Superior Court Judge Howard Manning Jr., who ordered the state to improve programs for young children at risk of poor school performance.

Tuition for in-state students and out-of-state students at public universities will be raised. In the area of health and human services, jobs will be cut, along with funding for some mental health programs, and group and nursing homes for the disabled. Even a program to provide dentures and root canals for Medicaid patients got the ax -- as if losing their teeth somehow served poor people right. The Division of Marine Fisheries will suffer a cut. So will juvenile justice programs and local crime prevention councils. (It's depressing, under the circumstances, but not surprising to see that the state subsidy to pay for maintenance of UNC-Chapel Hill's Dean Dome will be preserved.)

Democrats who run the Senate show have shied away from measures that could be framed, in upcoming elections, as state tax increases. Republicans have done little more than complain about the need to cut more, doubtless salivating at the prospect that between redistricting changes and their willingness to pounce on Democrats for "creating" the budget mess, they can perhaps take control of the General Assembly after the people go to the polls. (In fact, of course, Republican-led tax cuts of several sessions ago contributed to the current budget shortfall.) Statesmanship is leaving town. Leadership is riding shotgun.

North Carolina, dating from the days of desegregation, when some other southern states closed schools and dug in against federal law while this state did neither, has prided itself on being progressive and enlightened. But that self-image hangs on more than one issue. It means investing in education; it also means taking care of the sick, elderly, young and defenseless.

This budget, to some degree, would hurt them all. Certainly it's true that before new revenue sources are tapped, state government must demonstrate that it has trimmed itself to muscle and sinew. There can be no tolerance for waste amid a budget crisis likely to linger for more than a brief visit. It may be that lawmakers should consider furloughs, closing non-essential government offices one day a week, for example. And certainly vacant jobs that might be filled by political appointees can be left empty.

It appears, however, that unless lawmakers act between now and the end of this session to find substantial new sources of revenue while they also economize, the pride of North Carolina will suffer a body blow. It must be said that a state lottery, while the House may closely consider it, would not be a good revenue choice; the Senate was wise not to follow Easley's recommendation in that area. But there is money to be raised equitably, if not enthusiastically, through the closing of more tax-code loopholes or the addition of tax surcharges, both of which could include provisions to "sunset" after a limited period of time.

In the end, the General Assembly, and the governor, must do better. The budget as it stands is balanced on the backs of people already stooped with more burdens than they rightly should bear.