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Leaders must set priorities in budget plan

It's abundantly clear that the interests of Hawaii school children — at least in terms of recouping some of their lost classroom time — will be represented when the state Legislature convenes in January.

The protests of parents at the state Capitol, marking the first of two "Furlough Fridays" thus far, sounded a populist alarm that still resonates. That's raised the political heat on elected officials trying to make the best of a budgetary crisis.

Politicians who are heading into a seminal election year in 2010 are almost guaranteed to do their utmost to restore some classroom time to the students, with whatever resources they can free up.

But what about those less empowered or otherwise less likely to bring their case to the court of public opinion? Their services have been cut to the quick as well, and the recovery of tax funds to underwrite them remains a long way off. The next few budgetary years are likely to be lean, if not brutal.

It's the job of elected leaders to look out for their interests, too, whether or not there are protests at the Capitol or media coverage.

Those who are poor and need social services, those who are working toward a rejuvenation of Hawaii's industries and its preferred future, also need representation.

The Legislature has convened a "reinventing government" task force to search for solutions aimed at preserving core services within current budgetary constraints. Its second meeting is set for Friday.

This could be a good first step. But the more realistic view is that the assembled political, business and labor leaders in the task force will defend their own interests. What's needed are solutions that go beyond that minimal step, producing a leaner government that serves the greater good — one that's more affordable, given the state's lowered revenue expectations. The economic situation is too dire for half-measures or parochial protectionism.

The task force should query the community for its ideas and come up with the best recommendations for January. Then lawmakers will have to set priorities — such as education, basic health care and public safety — and hold to them during the "reinvention" process.

So far, it's the squeaky wheel that's been getting the grease. Lawmakers need to make sure all the wheels are turning, and moving Hawaii in the right direction.