

## MASSACHUSETTS

# Commitment to higher ed questioned

## Sen. Panagiotakos criticizes Romney administration's improvement efforts

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BOSTON — A Lowell lawmaker yesterday questioned the Romney administration's commitment to improving public higher education in Massachusetts and said the state must invest far more in the 29-campus system than it has in recent years.

At a legislative hearing on Romney's fiscal 2006 budget proposal, Sen. Steven Panagiotakos, D-Lowell, told the governor's top budget aide that state and community colleges and the University of Massachusetts are being called on to do more with less. Enrollments are up, but budgets are lower than they were five years ago.

"Shouldn't we start investing in them in a more productive way than we have been?" said Panagiotakos, vice-chairman of the Senate Ways & Means Committee. "These are the citizens of the future in this Commonwealth. We will live

and die with these kids. All I've seen so far is vetoing the pay raises that were collectively bargained."

Eric Kriss, Romney's secretary of administration and finance, acknowledged that the administration has shied away from proposing sweeping changes in public higher education after the governor's 2002 plan to do so went down in flames.

"We've tried, and quite candidly been burned in an attempt to think about restructuring (the system)," Kriss said.

The 2002 plan drew headlines because it centered on the elimination of the UMass president's office and its then-occupant, former Senate President William Bulger. Lawmakers balked at the plan, though Bulger eventually resigned under pressure. The remainder of the restructuring plan was abandoned.

Kriss said lawmakers should do their part by adopting reforms to the way campuses structure tuition and fees for students. Individual campuses retain rev-



Steven Panagiotakos

enue from fees, but tuition reverts back to the state. So in recent years, student fees have skyrocketed to make up for revenue losses. Kriss said the arcane system should be abandoned.

Romney's budget calls for spending nearly \$900 million on higher education next year, about the same amount budgeted for fiscal 2005, but 17 percent less than the fiscal 2001 appropriation.

Panagiotakos acknowledged that the Legislature has gone along with the proposed cuts in higher education to balance the state

budget during the fiscal crisis, but said the state must now reshuffle its priorities to place a greater emphasis on public higher education.

The Lowell Democrat is heading up a Senate task force charged with examining the higher-education system and making recommendations for improvement. The task force is expected to report its findings shortly.

Yesterday's joint Ways & Means hearing was the last opportunity for Romney administration officials to make the case for their \$23.2 billion spending plan before the Legislature takes over the process.

Also at yesterday's hearing, Kriss defended the governor's proposal to roll back the state income tax from 5.3 to 5 percent, a move that was approved by voters at the ballot box but has yet to be fully implemented by the Legislature.

Kriss said the tax cut would cost the state \$225 million in the first year. While lawmakers have been skeptical, he insisted the state can afford it.

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