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HEADLINE: * Stoltzfus named to budget team

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SALISBURY -- Gov.-elect Robert Ehrlich has named Lower Shore Sen. J. Lowell Stoltzfus to help create the first Republican-crafted budget in Maryland in more than 30 years.

Stoltzfus, a Somerset County Republican, was officially named to Ehrlich's budget team Wednesday.

The group, which has met nearly every day for the past two weeks, is responsible for creating a state spending plan which Ehrlich will introduce next month to the General Assembly.

Unlike governors in most other states, Maryland's governor has significant spending power and control. Though lawmakers can cut portions of the budget, they are unable to add any more initiatives or shift funding without the governor's consent.

The distinction means even more this year as Ehrlich -- the first GOP governor since Spiro T. Agnew departed the State House to serve as vice president -- has the opportunity to restructure state

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spending that has been under Democratic control for nearly a generation.

"It's a huge change," said Stoltzfus, who in the next session will serve as minority leader in the state Senate for a third time. "It's just fun knowing we're going to have a Republican leading.

"I think the budget is going to really represent the wishes of the Eastern Shore this year," he said Wednesday.

But Ehrlich and his budget team have little latitude in spending this time around. Because of a slowing economy

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and heavy state spending on education and other programs for the last decade, Maryland faces a \$590 million budget deficit in the next year alone. The deficit is predicted to be as high as \$1.2 billion in the next two years.

Ehrlich has pledged not to raise taxes to make up the difference, which means Stoltzfus and the team must find a way to cut money to balance the budget.

"Some (programs) are going to be taking cuts," Stoltzfus said.

The senator would not say what areas were under consideration.

The budget team also must make revisions to outgoing-Gov. Parris N. Glendening's final budget, which covers state spending until July 2003.

"Right now we're looking at the 2003 budget, and there are a few problems," Stoltzfus said.

However, one major increase will remain from the Glendening administration, Stoltzfus said. Under recommendations from a statewide commission, lawmakers last year authorized a \$1.6 billion boost to state education spending over the next five years. Ehrlich has ordered the increases to remain.

"Ehrlich has made it clear that it will continue to be a priority," Stoltzfus said.

Stoltzfus, who was elected in 1992, has served on the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee since 1999. After helping create the budget, Stoltzfus will likely be the one expected to rally support from the Democrat-controlled Senate.

In addition to serving as a spokesman for Republican legislators in recent years, Stoltzfus has been a vocal advocate for the farming and seafood industries.

Stoltzfus was offered the chance to head the state Department of Natural Resources when Ehrlich was elected last month over Lt. Gov. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend.

"But I nixed that," Stoltzfus said. "I feel I can serve best where I am."

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