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SALISBURY -- Though he was on the Senate floor until midnight Monday, Minority Leader J. Lowell Stoltzfus kept a noon appointment Tuesday with the Wicomico Rotary Club, where he recapped another contentious legislative session of the Maryland General Assembly.

"The budget continues to be a serious problem that needs to be addressed," he told Rotary Club members during the group's weekly meeting. "I don't know what's going to happen next year."

With a budget deficit of about \$1 billion projected for Maryland, state legislators remain divided on how to solve a looming fiscal crisis.

Gov. Robert Ehrlich for the second year failed to win support in the House of Delegates for his slots plan, while members called for \$670 million in tax increases.

Stoltzfus, R-38-Somerset, has consistently opposed gambling. But he said Tuesday the future of slots is in the hands of House leaders -- particularly House Speaker Michael Busch, D-30-Anne Arundel, who has argued that a new tax program is needed to solve the state's budget issues.

"Ask him, don't ask me," Stoltzfus said. "We've just got to make a decision, folks."

Stoltzfus wanted to ease budget pressures by extending the number of years to fund the Thornton education plan, a \$1.3 billion reform initiative.

But his plan failed and \$326 million is committed to fully fund the Thornton program in Ehrlich's \$23.6 billion budget.

"This is putting tremendous stress on the state budget," Stoltzfus said.

On Tuesday, Stoltzfus also questioned whether funding can solve the problems facing public schools.

"Those kids come with a lot of needs, and these teachers are expected to perform some kind of magic in society," he said. "(But) I'm not sure money is going to fix the problem."

Still, Stoltzfus said the 2004 session was productive and, at least on the Senate side, not overly combative. Environmental legislation -- including brownfields, a sewage surcharge bill and a refined nutrient management program -- are among the highlights, he said.

"Now you have the agriculture community as partners," he said.

Shortly after state lawmakers adjourned late Monday night, Stoltzfus met with Ehrlich. Despite another year without slots, Stoltzfus said the governor was upbeat about the General Assembly's 2004 session.

"He's very happy with what happened," Stoltzfus said.

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