

Group wants end to lawmaker perks

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By CHARLES CRUMM of The Oakland Press

With an end-of-the-month deadline looming to settle the remaining cuts to balance the fiscal 2008 budget, state senators are being asked to sign a pledge that they'll vote to end lawmakers' lifetime health benefits and vote to cut their pay by 5 percent.

"We're sending them a clear message of how absolutely important it is that they lead by example," said Dan Farough, of the group Progress Michigan, which is asking for the pledges.

The budget agreement reached earlier this month includes \$440 million in cuts, and a 30-day extension was passed to iron out the details of those cuts.

The state House has passed legislation that would cut lawmakers' pay by 5 percent and eliminate lifetime health care for future legislators.

Farough said lawmakers have until Tuesday to return the pledges.

"Part of our effort is to force a vote on ending free lifetime health care for current and future legislators," Farough said. "Part of the goal here is ferret out any senators that would oppose this measure and support those who are backing it."

Local senators say they'll look at the proposals but dismiss Progress Michigan and its pledge as "gimmickry."

"Progress Michigan is just a political gimmick group," said Matt Marsden, spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Mike Bishop, R-Rochester. "I'm not sure we're even going to recognize that kind of gimmickry. We're all going to share the pain of the Democrats' tax increase.

"This kind of political gamesmanship serves no relevant purpose in what we're trying to do here, which is finish the deal on the 2008 budget by the deadline set," Marsden said.

State Sen. Nancy Cassis, RNovi, also dismissed the pledge as a political stunt.

"I don't need to sign a pledge to do the right thing," Cassis said. "They are calling themselves a progressive grassroots organization. In reality, they're an ultraliberal front for the unions.

"I really question their motives," she said. "It is my opinion that they are trying diligently to distract from a real meaningful reform agenda that Republicans in the Legislature are pushing.

"It's a political stunt to take away attention from (Gov. Jennifer) Granholm and the administration's failed economic policy," Cassis said.

