

Lawmakers should cut own benefits, group says

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By CHARLES CRUMM of The Oakland Press

When lawmakers return to Lansing today, the first thing they should do is vote to get rid of their own lifetime health insurance, a coalition of groups says. "Others are being asked to sacrifice in tough times," said Dan Farough of the fledgling advocacy group Progress Michigan.

"We are all sending a signal to Lansing that legislators need to lead by example, eliminate their free lifetime health care and cut their pay," Farough said at news conferences around the state, including Rochester Hills.

Farough was joined by representatives of unions that represent public school and public employees upset that the budget agreement reached by lawmakers last week made changes to public and school retirement health benefits but left lawmakers' benefits untouched.

Lawmakers have until the end of the month to establish \$440 million in cuts that were part of the budget deal.

"(Senate Majority Leader) Mike Bishop (R-Rochester) says he needs time to study the issue," Farough said. "We think that's a farce. It's not the right message to send to Michigan citizens." The group has set up a Web site called NoLansingFreeRide.com to solicit comments.

House-passed legislation proposes to do away with lifetime health care for lawmakers and to reduce their pay by 5 percent. Lawmakers qualify for health care after six years in the Legislature. The laws passed as part of the budget deal cut health benefits for public and public school retirees, the groups argue.

"If there's further cuts, the Legislature ought to take the first step and cut themselves first," said Doug Pratt, spokesman for the Michigan Education Association. "They need to lead by example."

Bishop spokesman Matt Marsden said some Senate lawmakers have been in office long enough to be vested in the retirement health system.

"If you take that away from them, they could leave office and sue the state," Marsden said. "We also know if we just do future legislators, people will holler, 'Why didn't you include sitting legislators?' We're working on it."

"This is a reform we recognize. We don't need the Democrats to tell us it's an important reform. We have to proceed in a manner that won't be overturned later," Marsden said.