

## **Supporters of children's programs urge supervisors to dissuade state from diverting funds**

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Supporters of programs for children throughout San Luis Obispo County came out in force Tuesday, asking the Board of Supervisors to help dissuade the governor from solving the state's budget crisis by diverting state money that is supposed to go to youngsters through the First 5 program.

Robin Smith of Templeton said the governor's plan undoes a decade of hard work and grass roots problem solving and "throws it out the window."

Smith was one of several children's advocates to speak. Among the others were representatives of the Children's Health Initiative, the Economic Opportunity Commission, the Child Abuse Prevention Council and the Community Health Foundation.

As a partial solution to the state's \$42 million budget shortfall, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has proposed eliminating the state First 5 Commission and shifting its money to the general fund.

The First Five refers to the first five years of life - and earlier, since its initiatives include pre-natal programs. Voters created it in 1998 when they passed Proposition 10, which brought into being the statewide First 5 program, with implementation taking place at the local level.

Each of the state's 58 counties has a First 5 Commission. Under Schwarzenegger's plan, half of their money would go to the state general fund.

But local groups have worked for 10 years to put programs in place to help children, advocates said, and have succeeded in instituting many of them.

Among the programs it has helped or is helping with in San Luis Obispo County are Martha's Place; the Children's Oral Health Initiative, school readiness initiatives; and the Head Start school readiness enrichment program, advocates said.

Supervisor Katcho Achadjian strongly endorsed the groups' call for support, but supervisors as a whole could not take action because they had not formally scheduled a vote.

Nonetheless, Achadjian praised the speakers for being "the pulse of our community," and said it "absolutely doesn't make sense" to balance the budget at the expense of children.

"They're our future," he said. "They're our responsibility."

Supervisor Jim Patterson said the speakers should also lobby state legislators. He said he hears from Assemblyman Sam Blakeslee's office repeatedly that "they're not hearing from the local citizenry" or getting "letters of distress."

County Administrative Officer David Edge warned that Schwarzenegger, in his effort to move money away from First 5, is framing the move as a transfer of funds to other kinds of children's programs such as adoption, child welfare and getting youngsters out of abusive situations.

By taking a position favoring First 5, supervisors are "opening the door to accepting both ends of the stick," Edge said

Kenna Burke of the Children's Health Initiative told The Tribune later that the final destination of money should the governor succeed in moving it to the general fund is not clear, whereas there is no funding source for youngsters under five other than First 5.