



JAN McMAHON Time to beef up the public sector budget

WITH the delayed State Budget looming, speculation has been increasing about what it may contain. Media analysts and the Opposition have regularly forecast negative predictions.

The Public Service Association has refused to join the pre-Budget guessing game.

Instead, we have chosen to consistently remind the Government – and the people who elected it – of promises made six months ago during the election campaign.

At that time, Premier Mike Rann and Treasurer Kevin Foley announced they would increase spending in the areas of law and order, health and education. And they promised they would not cut public sector jobs and services.

It is time for them to keep their promises.

Far from blowing out uncontrollably, public sector job numbers in this state are at historically low levels. Slight increases in recent years have been in response to increased spending on health, education, and law and order.

To achieve the Government's goals, nurses and doctors have had to be found, police officers recruited and more teachers trained.

These people are all numbered within the public sector workforce. And they can't work alone. They require the backup of other staff

to perform their valued roles. Per capita, South Australia still has lower numbers of public sector workers than any other comparable state or territory. Only the larger states, such as New South Wales and Victoria, have a lower per capita ratio – enabled by the economy of scale their much larger population base allows.

In response to the State Government's recent pre-Budget review of public sector services and spending, the PSA highlighted a critical shortage of staff in a wide range of areas.

These included: social workers, speech therapists and pathologists, occupational therapists, correctional officers, psychologists, community service and youth workers, guidance officers, court staff, engineering project officers and specialised scientific positions.

Vulnerable people in need have been missing out or put on ever lengthening waiting lists.

The existing skills shortage and recruitment difficulties within the public sector are about to get worse. Skilled and professional workers are prepared to go interstate for more attractive packages. The public sector, along with the rest of the population, is ageing.

Put simply, unless we recruit people now, and retain them, there will never again be enough people to provide the services needed.

Reform is needed to prevent this. The PSA
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and public sector workers are not afraid of change. Rather, we have lobbied for it, seeking improved efficiencies and more effective management methods.

We have suggested a raft of reforms which we hope have been heeded in this forthcoming Budget. These include better workforce management, inter-departmental communication and recruitment strategies.

Further to this, the PSA commissioned independent research on the state's economy.

This research revealed, as the Premier and Treasurer have also regularly stated, that the state's economy is in extremely good shape.

Public sector debt has been massively reduced. Proper levels of government spending, on infrastructure and services, is needed to stimulate growth and provide employment and a healthy economic environment.

We hope the Budget delivered on September 21 will reflect this. If, however, the Budget boosts spending on the Government's electoral trigger areas of health, education, and law and order at the expense of other also vital services, the voters will have the right to ask why.

The pursuit of a "balanced" Budget cannot come at the expense of a balanced society.

Jan McMahon is general secretary of the Public Service Association of SA.