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GOP boss's activism causes party furor

Some Republican lawmakers say his strong anti-tax e-mails make it tough to forge budget fix.

Mark Hornbeck / Detroit News Lansing Bureau

LANSING -- Republican lawmakers are increasingly irritated with their state party boss, Saul Anuzis, because they say his steady drumbeat against raising taxes is making it more difficult to work out a deal to resolve Michigan's nagging budget deficit.

Anuzis, chairman of the Michigan Republican Party, sends out a daily e-mail to about 4,000 party activists and opinion leaders called "Articles of Interest" that includes his commentary on issues. Those comments often include statements exhorting legislators to stand tough against raising taxes as they bargain with Democrats to erase a deficit of up to \$1.8 billion by the Oct. 1 deadline to adopt a budget.

A GOP legislative staffer, who asked to remain anonymous, said Republican lawmakers frequently grumble behind closed doors that they realize they'll eventually have to vote for a tax hike and that Anuzis' diatribes are making their jobs tougher and a resolution more elusive.

Lawmakers and Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm have been wrestling with the shortfall for seven months. The Legislature returns Tuesday.

Among lawmakers' complaints: It's unprecedented for a party chairman to dictate policy to legislators of his own party.

"It's a gray area at best, but it's indicative of the partisanship that exists in Lansing that keeps us from getting work done in a statesman-like manner," said Rep. Lorence Wenke, R-Galesburg, who occasionally parts with the GOP leadership on policy matters.

"Is Saul Anuzis breaking some new ground here? It seems he is setting the new low standard."

Anuzis said it's his role to "reflect the feeling of the party. We want real reform first before discussion of any tax increase. I think I am representing the views of our party members."

He noted that the Republican State Committee last month unanimously passed a resolution calling for government reforms and tax cuts before any tax increases are considered.

Wenke said Anuzis is doing the bidding of the national party, which wants to establish a conservative brand for the 2008 presidential election.

"The party clearly is positioning itself for the '08 election, and this is what party leaders like Saul are paid to do," Wenke said.

Replied Anuzis: "My job is to make sure we as a party don't lose our brand, don't lose the image that attracts people to vote for us."

One Republican lawmaker, who asked not to be named because of concerns about crossing swords with party leaders, said: "The last thing we need is somebody who is not an elected official publicly hammering on us. He's not the one who has to put his name on the line and vote for or against this. I've never seen this before, and I've been in the party a lot of years, where a party chair is dictating policy. It's inappropriate and a growing number of us are sick and tired of it."

Sen. Nancy Cassis, R-Novi, is among GOP lawmakers who say they have no problem with Anuzis' editorializing.

"Everyone certainly has a right to weigh in on what is a defining moment in Michigan history," she said. "I think all voices should be heard. We are representatives of the people, who have to look at what all sides are saying and then make decisions.

"And I'm among those who believe the party should return to its conservative core mission."

In Friday's e-mail after the House and Senate again failed to come to an agreement on the budget, Anuzis wrote: "Republicans stood firm, demanding real reforms, budgets that live within our means and NO NEW TAXES. Call your Republican state senator and representative and thank them for standing up for the taxpayers of Michigan!!!"

Bill Rustem, president of Public Sector Consultants Inc., an independent public policy think tank in Lansing, said he's never seen a party chairman go to these lengths to influence policy. Rustem is a veteran of state government under the administration of Republican Gov. William Milliken.

"When was the last time you saw the chairman of a party threatening legislators in his own party? Who's working for whom?" Rustem said.

Richard McLellan, a Lansing attorney and Republican activist who was a close adviser to Gov. John Engler, asked: "What is Saul doing? Somebody is going to have to tell him to knock it off."