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N.J. Democrats set stage for battle with Gov. Christie about family planning funds in budget

TRENTON — Democrats voted Thursday to restore \$7.5 million for health and family planning services for uninsured women — but not before the bill became a referendum on abortion and a senator read aloud from a Planned Parenthood brochure on teen sex.

Both the Democrat-controlled Assembly and Senate budget committees also set the stage for a clash with Gov. Chris Christie by passing the bill, which would reverse the governor's decision to cut the funding.

The bill precludes New Jersey's 58 family-planning clinics from using the money for abortions, but conservatives were suspicious because Planned Parenthood runs 29 of the clinics.

Assemblyman Jay Webber (R-Morris) stunned colleagues by reading from a Planned Parenthood International brochure: "Healthy, Happy and Hot — A Young Person's Guide to Their Rights, Sexuality and Living with HIV."

"This brochure goes on to urge adolescents to 'have fun, explore and be yourself,'" Webber read in an even tone. "Many people think sex is just about vaginal or anal intercourse, but there are many different ways to have sex, and lots of different types of sex. ' "

Assemblywoman Joan Quigley (D-Hudson) cut Webber off.

"Is this necessary?" she asked. "I'm offended by your behavior — not what you're reading, but the fact that you're reading it."

Michele Jaker, executive director of the Planned Parenthood Affiliates, said she had never seen the brochure, and no state money subsidizes Planned Parenthood International.

Webber said he also objected to Jaker's testimony that family planning clinics saved the state money in 2009 by preventing nearly 40,000 unintended pregnancies and preventing 19,000 abortions.

"It's wrong to put a price tag on children. Children are our future. We want more children, not less," he said.

An incensed Sen. Loretta Weinberg (D-Bergen), one of the bill's sponsors, retorted: "Am I to assume you believe poor women should not have access to birth control?"

The bill funds the health services by moving money Democrats say won't be needed from the state employee prescription drug program.

Christie has never cited the abortion issue as a reason for cutting the funding. But he was resolute about his decision in a Wednesday night radio program on 101.5 FM.

"I don't believe that is a priority in a budget where you have to cut \$11 billion," the governor said. "I believe that women have the opportunity to access health care all across New Jersey. Family planning has nothing to do with mammograms, and don't put the two of them together."

Citing Christie's "confusing" remarks and noting the clinics performed more than 60,000 breast exams last year, Weinberg subsequently met with the governor's chief of staff, Richard Bagger.

"Mr. Bagger said he was unaware we had a funding source for the bill, and he was going to see if he agrees with our interpretation of the dollars," she said.

By Claire Heininger and Susan K. Livio/Statehouse Bureau Staff

Statehouse reporter Matt Friedman contributed to this report.