

Eight years ago, Gov. Jon Corzine went before a joint session of the Legislature to deliver an address to an audience that New Jersey has a government it could not afford.

Coming from Corzine -- a governor not known for his tightfistedness -- the comment was a sign that a new day of austerity had dawned and lawmakers had best take heed.

Corzine failed, though, to offer the corollary to his unaffordability remark: New Jerseyans are willing to pay more than they're willing to pay for.

This conundrum has been evident each year as the appropriate budget committees embark on their annual task of holding public hearings to hear from anyone with suggestions about spending less or spending more.

As in prior years, recommendations to spend more have dominated recent hearings.

Representatives of organized groups have followed one another to the microphone to urge an increase in funding for their cause. They come armed with charts and statistics along with testimonials about their programs and warn of serious consequences if funding is lost.

They personalize their pleas by putting a human face on a program's beneficiaries. They argue that a loss of funding will have a life-altering impact on those who depend on government-supported programs.

Some seek modest sums; others more significant amounts. They fall across a wide and diverse range of programs from health care to higher education to homeless shelters to job training.

Over the years, few have been successful, and this year's outcomes may fall short of even that. As state budget resources -- always keen -- will be considerably sharper this year as a result of continued tax revenue growth and stubbornly slow economic recovery.

Programs enacted in fiscally rosier times and whose constituencies have grown and strengthened are being steadily whittled down the priority list as shrinking resources are shifted to more pressing needs and

