

LEAVITT SUPPORTS CONTROVERSIAL TIPS PROGRAM

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Gov. Mike Leavitt said Thursday President Bush's call for Americans to spy on each other doesn't alarm him.

Among other post-Sept. 11 tactics to combat terrorism, the president originally suggested that truckers, bus drivers, railroad conductors, mail carriers and utility workers to call in tips about suspicious activity. Bush calls it "Operation TIPS" -- Terrorism Information and Prevention System.

As the only governor on Bush's Homeland Security Advisory Council, Leavitt had the chance to review the plan before it was released this week. "It's not something I raised a lot of concerns over," he said at his monthly KUED Channel 7 news conference.

However, critics from the American Civil Liberties Union to Republican leaders oppose the proposal for being invasive and potentially violating citizens' civil rights.

Newsday wrote that the Select Committee on Homeland Security, headed by House Majority Leader Dick Armey, R-Texas, has proposed banning any operation that would "promote citizens spying on one another," and the Postal Service issued a statement saying "it was decided that the Postal Service and its letter carriers would not be participating in the [TIPS] program at this time."

"The TIPS program should make American citizens very frightened," said ACLU of Utah attorney Janelle Eurick.

Besides the tip hot line, Bush sought to create stricter standards for obtaining driver licenses, develop vaccines for biological weapons, establish lines of succession for top state officials in case of an attack, limit public access to information about utilities and chemical plants and give the federal government the authority to deploy the National Guard, an option currently reserved for governors.

The original proposal was to launch the plan in August, but wire service reports say that, under mounting criticism, the Justice Department has changed its Web site and been less specific about who should take part in the TIPS program and when it will begin.

Leavitt compared the current debate over Bush's homeland security plan to discussions Utah public safety officers had when preparing for the 2002 Winter Games.

"We don't want to live in a police state," Leavitt said. "And yet I know that there are members of al-Qaida and other terrorist organizations who are residents in this country."

Also Thursday, the governor reiterated his commitment to education and questioned the continued funding of state water subsidies and road projects and granting sales tax exemptions on, among other things, ski resorts and airline food.

State lawmakers finished painfully slicing \$173 million out of the state's \$7 billion budget last week. The latest revenue numbers from July show an increase in revenue of about \$5 million or \$6 million. But with health care and education costs growing each year, Leavitt still expects the 2004 budget process to be just as uncomfortable. He calls the clash between education and state building projects an "inevitable train wreck."

"We have spent a lot of money on roads. We've spent a lot of money on water development," he said. The governor said, "I'm asking the question, Which ought to come first? Are we going to continue to subsidize water rates and then undersupport education? We've got to rethink that proposition."