

Medical copayment proposal overshadows debate over budget

Catalan government considers charging one euro copayment for medical visits

AGENCIES

The Catalan Parliament yesterday approved the budget for the current year with an eye towards overall budget reduction and finding ways to boost funding for the financially-strapped public health system, including a controversial proposal to add a one euro copayment for medical visits.

The budget for the current year is set for 22.5 billion euros, a figure which includes a 2.75% reduction over last year's budget. The 2004 budget puts the deficit at 0.58 percent of Catalonia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

To reduce the public health deficit, several ideas were batted around in addition to the copayment scheme, including a proposed surcharge on petrol as well as raising taxi fares. According to Health Minister Marina Geli, such measures are not designed to be a primary source of financing but are needed to make needed improvements to the health system. She also said that asking patients to make copayments for visits will not limit access to health care but will "make people value a health system that is paid for by everyone".

Geli also admitted that she had an "ideological doubt" as to whether charging for medical visits to doctors was an appropriate measure, but added that copayments are already being used in the "majority of European Union countries" and that working-age citizens already pay for a part of their prescription drug costs.

She stressed the overall importance of securing more funding for the health system one way or another, and said that the preferred method of doing so was through direct taxation. Meanwhile, the president of the Spanish Society of Rural and General Medicine (SEMERGEN) Julio Zarco yesterday rejected the Catalan proposal to study the copayment proposal, saying that "it



Protesting olive farmers say they have not been awarded the full amount of subsidies they were promised / ANDREU PUIG

Olive farmers protest at Parliament over subsidies

Catalan Parliament members were greeted yesterday by protests from 300-500 farmers in the olive sector, who were demanding full payment of subsidies that were approved in December 2001. An organisation representing the olive producers protested the government's announcement of a 600-700 euro per hectare reduction in subsidy money.

Some were calling for the resignation of the agricultural

minister Antoni Siurana as well as Generalitat president Pascual Maragall. A small group of protesters managed to have a meeting with Parliament president Ernest Benach. According to Benach, it was not normal to give out subsidies all at once, while a representative of the growers maintained that too many growers are being left out of the government's current subsidy distribution scheme.

was not feasible in a public health system" and that it violates the principles of social equality. He said to a Europa press journalist "I firmly believe that this proposal will not be

implimented."

The trade unions CCOO and UGT have also come out steadfastly against the medical copayment system. "We will reject any attempt to

establish a payment system for medical services," said Manuel García Biel, spokesman for the CCOO in Catalonia. "The preferential use of indirect taxes is highly unfair."

Fira de Calella to feature debates and handicrafts with Scottish presence

TERESA MÁRQUEZ/NEIL STOKES

Parallels are often made between Scotland and Catalonia and in this year's *Fira de Calella* Scottish representatives have been invited to take part. From 22 to 26 September, Calella will celebrate the 24th Fira with a series of debates. Councillor Miquel Pérez (ERC) singles out discussions on the first Fira del Motor, "to provide dynamism to a sector important for the local economy." As

the self-proclaimed capital of the Costa Brava, the future of the tourism industry, to which the Scots have long been Major contributors, will also be debated.

These round table sessions are a departure for the fair which will take place on the Passeig de Manuel Puigvert. Mayor Josep Basart points out, "We wanted a unique meeting place and a fair in constant evolution." Another innovation at this

year's celebration will be an exhibition of pottery by over a hundred craftsmen, along with two more exhibitions by the Centre Català d'Artesania. For the first time, fair organisers also offered the design of the publicity poster in a competition worth 500 euros.

The winner, designer Anna Vivancos, has created a classical design combining traditional features of Calella with a call to attend. With a

budget of 105,300 euros, this year's fair is the most expensive ever and Miquel Pérez is confident that more participants can be attracted to the seaside town, beating the 60,000 who visited last year's event. In January it became part of the Federation of Fairs of Catalonia and has since adopted a new logo. More information can be found at the fair's website at www.calella.org, which began operation yesterday.

EUROPEAN

Borrell chosen as next president

The Spanish MEP, Josep Borrell, has been chosen as the next president of the European parliament, after an agreement between the socialists and the popular party to share the presidency in the next session, which starts on 20 July. The agreement did not have the support of the Portuguese socialists. Josep Borrell will be the third Spaniard to serve in this role following Enrique Barón (1989-1992) and Jose Maria Gil-Robles (1997-1999). The president of the European popular party, Hans-Gert Poettering, said they had made an agreement so that Borrell could serve as the next president over the course of the next two and half years, followed by a candidate from the popular party, probably Poettering, starting in January 2007.

ENVIRONMENT

Ecologists' anger at sea dumping

The centre for mediterranean ecology has hit out at the alleged dumping of construction waste into the port of Tarragona. The centre has complained to the police department responsible for protecting the environment about the issue. The ecologists claim that the waste is coming from the works for new car terminals that are being constructed along the coast. They say that the waste includes mud, metal, plastic and rubber. "This waste being dumped in the sea has not been treated and could lead to contamination of the sea," said a spokesperson for the centre. They claim the alleged dumping breaks 1972 regulations agreed to prevent dumping of waste material in the sea, which was ratified by the Spanish government in 1974.

HEALTH

New treatment for eye defect

A hospital in Sabadell is the first public health centre in Catalonia to use a new technique in the treatment of cataracts, which involves little discomfort for the patient but a speedy recovery. The treatment is being pioneered at the Parc Taulí hospital in the city and involves making a very small cut in the eye of only 1.5 millimeters and then a contact lens is implanted as a substitute for the lens that taken out. Using conventional surgery surgeons have to make an incision of 3 millimeters. The reduction in the incision provides less risk of infection. The new technique also means the patient spends less time in the hospital. Eye experts are set to meet later this year in Spain and they have invited doctors from the hospital to explain their new surgical advances.

JUSTICE

Freedom for terror suspect

A judge in the Spanish High Court has said a suspected Al Qaeda member can be released from prison if he pays 3000 euros bail. Hamed Abdelrahman Ahmed was being held by the Americans in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, until his transfer to a Spanish prison in February this year. Judge Garzón said he will impose restrictions on Ahmed's liberty once he has been freed.