

Goodbye \$120,000 flower pots: Culver budget action gets mixed reviews

By DAN GEARINO, Globe Gazette Des Moines Bureau

DES MOINES — Rep. Jeff Kaufmann, R-Wilton, says the excesses of this year's legislative session can be summed up with one line item from the budget: \$120,000 flower pots.

For Kaufmann, this tiny part of the 2007-08 spending plan says everything Iowans need to know about Democrats' lack of financial discipline.

So what does he say now that Gov. Chet Culver, a Democrat, has used his line-item veto power to delete the flower pots and many other spending items?

"That's wonderful," Kaufmann said.

The \$120,000 was to be used for decorative planters that would be installed in a park just west of the Capitol. The state already has spent \$2.8 million to build the park and is scheduled to spend another \$1.8 million next year.

Culver says existing funding should be enough. This is exactly what Kaufmann said during legislative debate on the budget, an argument that didn't prevent the House and Senate from passing the item.

The governor took final action on the budget Tuesday evening, signing into law nearly \$6 billion in spending. In doing so, he used his line-item veto power more than 20 times.

Because Democrats control the House and Senate, almost all of the line-item vetoes involve projects or priorities held dear by members of Culver's own party.

"There were no easy decisions," said Culver spokesman Brad Anderson.

Sen. Roger Stewart, D-Preston, is chairman of the Senate Economic Growth Committee and a big supporter of the Community Attraction and Tourism, or CAT, grant program. He was dismayed to learn Culver line-item vetoed a provision that would have extended the program from 2011 to 2013.

Stewart learned of the veto Wednesday morning when he spoke to a reporter, moments after he told an audience in Dubuque that the CAT extension was one of the great accomplishments of the session.

He says CAT "has been wildly successful" and would be more successful if the officials who oversee the program have guaranteed funding far into the future, rather than an expiration date in just a few years.

Culver issued a statement explaining that he is leery of approving long-term funding, especially for a program that already has \$36 million to spend between now and 2010.

Many of Culver's line-item vetoes were for future-year funding of popular programs, such as \$1 million in recurring funding for the World Food Prize. For nearly all of the items, the governor chose a funding method that needs to be renewed each year over automatic renewal.

"The fact is that there are a lot of worthwhile programs out there, but the governor believes we need to be fiscally responsible with recurring appropriations," Anderson said.

Kaufmann and Stewart say they agree with Culver's approach in principle, though they may quibble with some of his choices of what gets funded and what doesn't.

"A few line-item vetoes that express those principles only begin to scratch the surface of some of the budget items that have concerned me," Kaufmann said.