Gov. Scott Walker's proposed $300 million cut to the UW System would mean significant job reductions at UW-Eau Claire, where university officials already are scrambling to cut $4.5 million from this year’s, Chancellor James Schmidt said.

At UW-Stout, the governor's proposal, if enacted by the Legislature, would mean a “significant challenge” for the university to accomplish its mission, Chancellor Bob Meyer said.

If the full amount of Walker's proposal is cut from the 2015-17 state budget, UW-Eau Claire would experience a $7.6 million funding reduction in 2015-16 and another $6.14 million decrease the following year, according to the Legislative Fiscal Bureau. At UW-Stout, those figures would be $5.76 million and $4.66 million.

Those decreases, on the heels of $250 million systemwide reductions during each of the last two state biennial budgets and a more than $60 million decrease in 2013, would necessitate significant job reductions, Schmidt said.

"There is no question our workforce will be greatly reduced," he said, noting that dealing with the governor's proposal would be “an enormous undertaking.”

UW-Eau Claire's $4.5 million cuts from this year's budget have resulted in the loss of 27.31 full-time equivalent jobs so far, Schmidt said, and more may be necessary.

Walker's proposal, on top of those reductions, would leave UW-Eau Claire in “an extremely difficult situation,” Schmidt said.

Schmidt said actions related to budget cuts would include consolidating student services, an administrative redesign, curricular changes and a study of faculty workload. He praised UW-Eau Claire staff for their hard work and dedication to their jobs.

"These are not nameless, faceless numbers on a spreadsheet," Schmidt said of the impact of budget cuts. “These are the people who inspire our students, the people who change lives.”

Meyer, who along with Schmidt attended the UW System Board of Regents meetings Thursday and Friday during which Walker's proposal was discussed, called the governor's budget “disappointing.” No specific decisions have been made regarding how to deal with the proposed cuts at UW-Stout, he said.

“So many people rely on this institution across the state to prepare people for the world of work,"
Meyer said. “The level (of proposed cutbacks) certainly speaks volumes (about) where we value education in the state of Wisconsin. It is a sad commentary.”

Meyer and Schmidt said they hold out hope the Republican-controlled Legislature reduces the $300 million budget-cut proposal.

“I've been heartened by the comments of some Republican legislators on this issue,” Schmidt said. “They realize the damage this would do to our universities.”

**Prompting action**

The proposal by Walker, who is fond of comparing his proposed $300 million cut to Act 10, his signature legislation that restricted collective bargaining for public workers and sparked massive protests, has prompted frustration among UW System employees.

Leaders at UW System campuses are ratcheting up warnings about how the cuts would cripple the system and are starting to mobilize tens of thousands of alumni in an effort to persuade Walker and legislators to scale the reduction back.

“I realize this may make you feel helpless,” UW-Whitewater Chancellor Richard Telfer wrote on that school's website. “However, the beauty of democracy is that we all have a voice. I would encourage you to use that voice ... We simply cannot allow the UW System, one of the state's greatest assets and economic drivers, to be weakened in this way.”

In addition to the $300 million reduction, Walker's plan would keep a tuition freeze in place for in-state students. In exchange Walker would give the system more freedom from state oversight and laws on building projects, procurement and tuition increases when the freeze expires in 2017.

Walker, who is grappling with a $2 billion deficit while pondering a 2016 run for president, has said less oversight would give the system the flexibility to absorb the cut, much like he said Act 10 helped government employers absorb budget cuts in 2011.

The depth of the cut, coupled with the inability to raise tuition to offset it, has left chancellors stunned. A Legislative Fiscal Bureau estimate shows UW-Madison next year would lose $57.7 million, nearly 12 percent of its current annual budget. UW-Whitewater would take the biggest percentage cut at nearly 19 percent.

UW-Madison Chancellor Rebecca Blank railed against the cuts during a regents meeting Thursday. She warned they'll lead to layoffs, force tuition increases for out-of-state and international students, push disgruntled faculty to leave and hurt the flagship campus' reputation.

System President Ray Cross followed that up by imploring chancellors and regents not to view the cuts in a “rhetorical, inflammatory or emotional way.”
But campus leaders aren’t sitting still.

Whitewater’s Telfer made his appeal for a write-in campaign on Wednesday. Blank sent a blast email to UW-Madison’s alumni the day of the regents meeting imploring them to write to Walker and legislators and demand they reduce the cut, saying the reduction “puts at risk the investment that generations of Wisconsinites have made to create a highly ranked university in our state.”

Blank also has scheduled a series of public forums on campus next week to discuss how the cuts would affect the school.