

State Budget Blues, and a Remedy

Once more the terrible deed is done. The long-deadlocked budget-balancers have finished their job by slashing another \$15,000,000,000 -- this time mostly from public education at all levels, and from essential services to the poorest and neediest.

That mayhem wasn't the work of Divine Providence, which is generally kinder to Californians than we probably deserve. It wasn't the inevitable result of an economic downturn either.

It was the premeditated work of a Governor and minority of legislators who are more concerned with the interests of those who own this state than they are with those of the majority of its citizens. Ordinary working people, and especially our children and grandchildren, were stoutly defended in Sacramento by our county's representatives Bill Monning, Anna Caballero and Joe Simitian ; but their side (the majority) did not prevail. Californians will pay a huge price for that failure of governance for years to come.

It needn't have happened. There are plenty of ways to increase revenues and cut costs of government while enhancing, rather than sabotaging, the quality of our collective life. Some of these were even on the table during this year's negotiations, but quickly dismissed as "unachievable." That shameful fact is a direct challenge to every concerned citizen. Let's consider a few of those possible fixes, so we can demand action on them when the 2010 pageant starts up six months from now.

The vehicle registration fee, slashed by the Governor six years ago in a grandstand play, has declined from two per cent of estimated value to .65 per cent since 1998. That saves average car owners \$138 a year, but costs the state four billion . Restoring the fee is a no-brainer.

An “oil severance tax” levied on each barrel pumped is a major source of revenue for every oil-producing state except ours. In 2006, California voters had a chance; but we rejected Prop 87, which would have raised another four billion with no significant increase in gasoline prices. Gotta rethink that one for sure.

A.B 390 would legalize, regulate and tax our \$14 billion annual marijuana crop, and the 16 million ounces of “weed” Californians currently buy for personal use. That cuts costs for expenditures on law enforcement, and yields a billion and a half in new revenue. A “dime-a-drink” alcohol consumption fee raises another billion and a half. Tripling the tobacco excise tax, a billion. Spending half that on substance abuse treatment would over the long run save a whole lot more.

Limiting “Three Strikes” to convictions for violent felonies saves a billion a year – even more if nonviolent three-strikers are resentenced to reasonable terms. Eliminating prison and parole for petty drug possession removes 30,000 people from “the system,” saves half a billion each year. Replacing capital punishment with life sentences, at least a hundred million. Closing the Division of Juvenile Justice(\$400 million a year to house 1600 youth in six facilities, 72% recidivism) saves a bundle. The kids could more effectively be rehabilitated, at lower cost, in their home counties.

“Single payer” universal health insurance (S.B. 810) was passed twice by the Legislature but vetoed by the Governor. That streamlines administration, cuts drug costs and prioritizes preventive care to save Californians twenty billion a year in premiums while preserving our choice of service providers. It relieves ERs of caring for the uninsured, cuts costs hugely for employers and the self-employed. The biggest beneficiaries would be our state, county and city governments and school boards -- taken together, the state’s biggest employer -- which now pay top dollar to private insurers. The savings there would run to many billions each year.

Pick one of these, or dig up one of your own. Then see to it that the Governor and legislators hear what you think about it regularly, and what your friends think all over

the state. For this purpose, a single hand-written postcard is worth a thousand e-mails.
But every communication counts.