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Want to avoid taxes? Don't urge lawmakers to spend

AUSTIN — Texans overwhelmingly oppose tax increases. Poll after poll — including the most important one on Election Day '02 — demonstrates that we as a people generally understand the economic importance of setting taxes low.

But to keep more of our own money, each of us has the responsibility to stop asking our legislators to spend it. We already have one of the most fiscally efficient state governments in the nation. But the \$9.9 billion budget shortfall tells us we still have work to do.

When the governor recently addressed the state, he clearly drew a line in the sand on tax increases. The people of our state "don't want, don't need and don't deserve new taxes," he said.

Gov. Perry also made it abundantly clear that the state's government must economize, and even downsize, in tough times: "Texas' fundamental budget problem is not with the legislators, but ourselves."

There is no budgetary boogie-man. The problem isn't them, it's us. It's the letters, phone calls



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Guest column

and gas-station chats with constituents that set spending priorities for legislators, not dinners in Austin with corporate lawyers.

Every project, every line-item, does have value. A few tax dollars for economic development? Of course. A little more to promote fine arts? Why not? Maybe expanded health care coverage for all teachers? Repaving a road here . . . New computers for a school there . . . A few more employees in that agency . . . A couple more vehicles for this one . . . Regardless of one's perspective, every line of spending in the state's budget — from economically justified and morally important, to

politically frivolous and hopelessly wasteful — shares one important characteristic with every other: It adds up to a bill that must be presented to the taxpayer.

Fundamentally, the tax issue is not about taxes, it's about spending, so we can't have it both ways. We cannot one moment ask government to pay for our projects, and the next tell legislators to cut our taxes.

Certainly there are inefficiencies. And, yes, state agencies and programs can suffer from the inevitable onset of bureaucratic mission creep. The inefficiencies must be rooted out, and programs abolished when no longer useful.

You and I as citizens and taxpayers cannot be content to grouse, complain, and then simply wait for legislators to do the right thing. We should certainly demand a reduction in spending as we converse with legislators, but more importantly we should demonstrate it in our attitudes and expectations toward state government in the daily affairs of civic life.

We should implement sliding-scale fees for welfare services, requiring those who can pay to pay what they can.

Where programs and procedures can be privatized, do so immediately. If the private sector is providing a service, state government should not.

The bureaucracy must be held accountable for the first dollar spent. Ultimately, state spending must be tied to economic analysis, not wishful thinking.

It's been said nothing sharpens the focus of the mind like a noose around one's neck. If that is the case, the much ballyhooed multi-billion-dollar budget shortfall is a great opportunity for Texans to examine our priorities and demand greater fiscal constraint.

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