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Bring Truth To Taxes

What Cities, Counties Don't Want You To Know

By Michael Quinn Sullivan

"The truth shall set you free." Familiar words. Easy concept. Unless you happen to be a taxpayer in Texas.

Lobbyists hired by city and county elected officials - through the Texas Municipal League and the Texas Association of Counties - are working hard to keep you from knowing and acting on the painful truth of taxes.

The concept is simple: When your tax bill is going up because appraised values are on the rise, you should be told. And if the tax bill is going up too much, you should at least have a fair chance at stopping it.

Currently, Texas cities and counties get a boost in taxing from the obscured appraisal system. When property values assigned by a government agency go up, your tax bill rises without the city council or county commissioners having to do a thing. Indeed, the tax bill can increase eight percent every year without the taxpayers getting so much as a chance to say no.

With the Texas House slated to soon consider House Bill 1006, the wrath of local taxing entities has descended upon Austin. Why? The name says it all: "Truth In Taxation."

The legislation simply requires that taxpayers be given more notice when their tax bill is going up, loosens the draconian process required of taxpayers to call for a tax rollback, and lowers the tax increase level that triggers a rollback to 3 percent.

But to hear the wailing and gnashing of teeth at the Capitol, one would think the end of the world is upon us. It's really not; it is just the end of the free ride local government has in raiding your pocketbook.

The arguments against it have been specious, at best.

Some lawmakers claim to worry about the trampling of 'local control.' The state currently has laws against local elected officials taking bribes. Should those be removed? The state mandates the posting of meetings so the public can be engaged in civic discussions. Would your legislator want to end that practice? The state dictates the qualifications for police officers, the obligations of county commissions, and the purview of municipal courts.

Why the hubbub over protecting the taxpayer? If the state isn't going to protect local taxpayers, who is?

The lobbyists working for your city council and county commissioners are telling legislators that implementation of HB1006 will mean the end of emergency services. Not true. The legislation doesn't tell cities how to prioritize their spending; it simply demands that taxpayers be afforded more information, and the opportunity to be involved.

In one of the more curious arguments, local officials have warned that HB1006 might prevent them from increasing taxes following a natural disaster. When has this happened? One of the worst tornado storms in recent memory took place in 1997 just north of Austin, in Jarrell. The loss of life and property was staggering.

Williamson County didn't raise taxes the next year. Why should they have? The clouds barely had time to dissipate before state and federal disaster money poured in. And what local official would even dream of raising taxes on people who had just had their lives turned upside down by a disaster?

Indeed, HB1006 doesn't stop taxing entities from increasing taxes at all. They just have to make the case before the voters for the effective tax rate to rise more than three percent in a single year. That exceeds inflation. And increased property value through new development with rising population is not touched.

The truth is powerful. But it is also inconvenient, especially in the minds of elected officials trying to keep the siphon hose attached to your wallet. With passage of HB1006, you just might break free.

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