

Viewpoints, Outlook

April 20, 2007, 9:02PM
AUSTIN QUESTION

Who's for Texas taxpayers?

Folks who foot bills need a voice

By TALMADGE HEFLIN

All session, Texas lawmakers have declared that this Legislature will be measured by how it treats the children. Legislators have accessorized their conviction with large buttons displaying their support for children, and made passionate statements that they must "err on the side of children."

Despite \$14 billion in new revenue coming into the state's coffers, any notion that the Legislature will be measured by how it treats hard-working Texas taxpayers has been forgotten. Some lawmakers who wrapped themselves in the flag of limited government, limited spending, and low taxes during their election campaigns have removed it from display now that they are in Austin.

Where are the buttons displaying support for taxpayers?

And with less than six weeks left in the session, few lawmakers are urging their colleagues to err on the side of protecting taxpayers. But of course, perhaps that is all too cynical. It may simply be that legislators have not yet had the opportunity to demonstrate their support for taxpayers since the taxpayer protection legislation, until recently, has languished in committee without a hearing.

The days of 2003 are not long behind us, but the lessons seem to be a distant memory. Upon arriving in Austin, that Legislature was confronted with a \$10 billion budget shortfall, the byproducts of a slowing economy and lower-than-expected tax collections. But the real culprit of this shortfall was the record spending binge of the previous Legislature, which inflated state spending by \$11 billion, or 13 percent.

With \$14 billion in surplus funds, you might think that legislators would not only be conscious of restraining government growth in an effort to prevent a future shortfall, but also preventing those surplus funds from ever arriving in Austin for a similar spending bonanza. Unfortunately, there has been little enthusiasm for tightening the state's ineffectual spending limit or even limiting the state's collection of revenue when it exceeds that weak current limit.

Furthermore, unless we restrain the growth of local government, the billions for property tax relief that lawmakers promised will instead be soaked up by local governments to fund their own excessive growth.

No doubt my former colleagues do not want to sit in that same situation in two or even 10 years, forced to rehash the same arguments or think of ways to spend a surplus, only to later regret such actions as a budget hole deepens. Neither do they want to return to their districts and face the same frustrated property owners who have seen promised property tax cuts devoured by ravenous local governments.

The only way to muzzle the rabid bite of growing government is to enact taxpayer protections that limit state and local expenditures. When government believes it needs to grow bigger or faster than these protections would allow, it should ask the people for that permission. Such growth would likely become the exception, rather than the rule.

It's not all bad news. House and Senate panels have conducted hearings on taxpayer protection proposals. But time is short and the bills must complete a lengthy process to become law. If these bills make it for a vote, surely legislators will renew their commitment to the taxpayers, parading proudly in their taxpayer protection buttons and boldly announcing that they are the taxpayers' friends.

The special interests hire their own lobbyists, but the taxpayers rely on their elected representatives to

represent them. If legislators won't defend the taxpayer, who will?

We can only hope that the taxpayers' friends will stand up before it's too late.

Heflin served 11 terms in the Texas House and is a former chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. He is presently a Visiting Research Fellow in the Center for Fiscal Policy Studies at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a nonprofit, free-market research institute in Austin.


VOICES OF HOUSTON

POWERED BY  Pluck

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Log in](#) | [Register](#)

Submit



ADVERTISING: [Contests](#) | [Fraudulent Ads](#) | [Information & Rates](#) | [Place An Ad](#) | [Singles In Houston](#) | [Yellow Pages](#) | [CHRONLINKS](#)
CHRONICLE: [Subscribe Now](#) | [Subscriber Services](#) | [Buy Photos](#) | [Chronicle in Education](#) | [Corrections](#) | [Public Affairs](#) | [RSS Feeds](#)  [RSS](#)
SERVICES: [Copyright Notice & Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Help](#) | [Registration](#) | [Report a Problem](#) | [Site Map](#) | [News Alerts](#) | [Newsletters](#)