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Talmadge Heflin, guest column: Go beyond rhetoric and protect taxpayers

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AUSTIN — 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 hardworking 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 five 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 . . . because key 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.

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.

House and Senate panels conducted hearings last week on taxpayer protection proposals, but time is running 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?

Talmadge Heflin served 11 terms in the Texas House and is a former chairman of the House Appropriations Committee.

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