

opinion

## No taxation without information

By Amy Oliver and Stephanie Kubala

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In the last decade, generous Coloradans approved additional funding for K-12 education, increased tobacco taxes and Referendum C-the state's largest tax increase in history. In addition, taxpayers agreed to numerous local and regional tax increases, such as RTD's FasTracks.

Also, in the last couple of sessions the state legislature raised numerous fees bringing the state millions of additional dollars.

Adding fiscal insult to injury, the Democratic-controlled legislature passed Governor Ritter's unconstitutional property tax "freeze," that brought another several hundred million dollars to the state coffers.

As a result, Colorado's budget has nearly doubled since 2000: from roughly \$10 billion to nearly \$20 billion today. Still it's not enough.

This November, Colorado voters may face upwards of three ballot measures that will raise taxes and increase state revenue.

Amendment 51 raises the state's sales tax from 2.9 percent to 3.1 percent.

Governor Ritter's Amendment 58 would increase severance taxes on the oil and gas industry.

House Speaker Andrew Romanoff's SAFE initiative eliminates future TABOR refunds and increases state K-12 education spending.

Question: What did government do with the money it already has? Taxpayers should not accept general answers that are long on numbers but very short on detail.

For instance, it's not enough to say higher ed is short \$850 million. Taxpayers should demand a complete accounting of every penny, and if officials are unable to do so, then maybe budgets are too big already.

Thanks to the Sam Adams Alliance, Colorado taxpayers have a new motto: No taxation without information!

Providing information is easy. Simply put government check registries online in a searchable database that includes contracts, grants and expenditures.

More than 20 states, including Kansas, Minnesota, Florida and New York already do this in some fashion.

Transparency is not specific to state size, geographical location, or political party. Even the federal government recognizes the importance of transparency with a database of its own.

None of this information is secret. In fact, check registries and copies of checks are a matter of public record.

Working Coloradans should not have to submit a Colorado Open Records Act (CORA) request nor pay

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fees to obtain information on how his or her tax dollars are spent.

Good news for northern Colorado residents. They won't need a CORA request. The Fort Collins city council unanimously passed a resolution to provide an online searchable database for all city expenditures.

The rest of Colorado is not so fortunate. During her 2006 campaign, Treasurer Cary Kennedy ran on a platform of budget transparency. She has yet to make good on her promise.

Although, she does provide Colorado taxpayers with a very pretty State Taxpayers Accountability Report (STAR) complete with graphs, charts, lots of color and fabulous pictures of Colorado.

For more information, Kennedy suggests the Comprehensive Annual Financial Report, which despite its 195 pages, doesn't tell taxpayers who receives their money.

In 2007, State Representative Don Marostica (R-Loveland) introduced HB 1164 the Taxpayer Transparency Act. The legislation required the state to create a searchable website for state contracts, grants and expenditures. It was killed in committee along a party line vote.

The million dollar-plus price tag is cited as one of the reasons for killing the legislation, but expamples from other states show the cost concern is a straw man argument. Director of the Fiscal Policy Center for the Texas Public Policy Foundation Talmadge Helfin explains the fallacy of cost argument in his article titled "Texas-sized Transparency."

Despite critics' predictions that the Texas transparency website titled "Where the Money Goes"

would cost millions, the actual cost was \$310,000. Through consolidation of contracts, transparency has saved the state millions of dollars.

Also in Texas, over 150 school districts post their check registries online. And Collin County, Texas is the first county in the nation to do the same.

Another impressive example is Alaska. Duane Sand, state director of Americans for Prosperity in South Dakota, cites it as an example of the ease of implementation. Alaska put its expenditures online "in the form of Excel spreadsheets in less than three weeks, utilizing employees and college interns."

Fortunately for Colorado taxpayers, they have an ally that buys ink by the barrel. The Colorado Press Association advocates for transparency and accountability.

Under a project called Open Government 2008, a number of editors from the state's major daily papers have penned editorials regarding the importance of open, transparent and accountable government at all levels.

When some elected official or special interest group want to increase your taxes, you have a response: No taxation without information!

Amy Oliver is the Director of Operations for the Independence Institute. Stephanie Kubala, Cornell University student, interned with the Independence Institute during the summer 2008.

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