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## Responsible Budget Needed From Austin

One of the most important duties of the Texas Legislature when it convenes in January will be to write a biennial budget for the state. In these uncertain economic times, that task takes on greater significance, says the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

"Budgets are about setting priorities," the Foundation writes in its recent report, "Building a Principled Budget: A Blueprint for the 2010-11 Biennium."



"No matter whether for a household or for an entire state, a sensible budget helps prioritize spending and set reasonable limits. Insisting on this type of budget discipline is critical since the state is reported to have another sizable surplus and there will be tremendous pressure on the Legislature to spend this money, rather than return some of it to taxpayers."

The steps the Legislature should take will be familiar to anyone who has ever budgeted their own income and expenditures.

"First, limit spending increases," the Foundation says. "Even though Texas has had a surplus this biennium, it may not have a surplus next biennium. Obligating taxpayers to pay for more government today, when we have been blessed with an overflow, forces tomorrow's taxpayers to pay higher costs for government in the future, when they may not be as fortunate."

The state should also focus on results.

"Programs and agencies can always spend more," the Foundation notes. "But that doesn't mean they necessarily should. Tax dollars are a limited commodity and should be treated as such when legislators are comparing costs against results."

The Legislature would do well to develop criteria for gauging an agency's effectiveness.

"Answering questions such as 'Does the program advance the goals of Texas government?' and 'Does the program have a history of success?' will be an important part of controlling the unnecessary growth of government," the Foundation contends.

And the state should further its commendable efforts to increase transparency.

"Financial transparency is an important part of good governance," the Foundation says. "It

allows fiscal watchdogs to identify spending inefficiencies, boosts taxpayer confidence, and promotes open government."

And if there's still a surplus, the money should go back to taxpayers, the Foundation says -- a surplus represents an overcharge, not a mandate for more spending.

"Once legislators have a finalized budget, any remaining surplus revenue should be returned to the taxpayers via targeted tax relief," the Foundation says. "The sales tax offers legislators the cheapest and simplest way to do this, since lowering the rate requires little government intervention and applies to the majority of Texas taxpayers."

Crafting a responsible budget isn't a choice for most citizens -- it's a necessity, particularly in troubled economic times. The Texas Legislature should do no less.

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