

Work together; good government not partisan issue

Darrio Melton 5:02 p.m. CDT June 3, 2015



Legislators have returned to Montgomery for the last days of the legislative session, but the rumor around the State House is that legislators aren't home free. The governor has promised from the beginning of the legislative session that he will veto a budget that doesn't include new revenue to support the general fund, yet the Alabama Legislature has sent the governor a budget that only offers extreme cuts across the board.

If the governor holds true to his word, he'll veto the budget and send the legislature into a special session later this summer.

Now the entire time, the Republicans have promised smaller government and no new taxes; however Alabama is at a crossroads where these two promises are mutually exclusive and a decision must be made: Do we want smaller government or do we want no new taxes?

The first choice is smaller government, which is what I think the Republican supermajorities are trying to accomplish by recklessly slashing funding for state programs. But the truth is, there are two types of programs we're putting in danger.

The first type are programs like the Department of Conservation that maintains our state parks, the Historical Commission that preserves our state landmarks and historical registries, and Forever Wild that maintains public forests and wildlife areas. Nobody wants to see these go, but smaller government means smaller government.

The cuts in the second type of programs are far more detrimental to the state of Alabama and will ultimately result in far bigger government -- programs like our Department of Corrections, Department of Mental Health, Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention, Medicaid and more. These programs are already struggling and have an intertwined effect on all Alabamians' lives.

Take our prison system, for example. It's already on the verge of a federal takeover and will almost certainly fall under the control of the federal government if we cut its budget even further. Look at the Department of Mental Health. With even less funding, we run the risk of putting patients back onto the street or placing a bigger strain on our prison and health care systems. If mental health patients are on the streets, we will depend more heavily on law enforcement, which we're also cutting in the new state budget.

Not to mention, we will lose programs that receive matching federal funds like the Department of Transportation and the Department of Public Health. Cutting these programs means that we lose twice the funding we strike from our budget.

The next option that the Republicans have promised is no new taxes.

Unfortunately, Alabama has needed new taxes for years, and this is a problem that the Republican supermajority has failed to address for five years in leadership. Let's not forget, the Republicans have the votes to do anything they want. They can tell dissenting voices to sit down and be quiet, and they can push through any legislation they see fit.

Republicans in the 2011 and 2012 legislative sessions knew the ends weren't going to meet, but they kicked the can down the road and tried to cut their way out of the problem. Then we had to borrow \$437.4 million from savings and they pinky-promised the voters they would put it back.

I agree with Gov. Bentley when he says "the most conservative thing you can do is pay your bills." When the voters allowed the state to borrow that money, it was part of the agreement that it would be paid back. But now that it's time to make the hard choices, the Republicans want to keep trying to cut our way out of the problem, putting critical programs at risk.

The supermajority ran for and won elections on promises that they would be fiscally conservative for the state of Alabama. But fiscally conservative isn't recklessly cutting and cutting without regard for the consequences or other options.

I hope we can enter a special session and take a more level-headed, realistic approach to the state budget. We can find a way to generate new revenue for the state without putting the burden on the backs of our hardest working families and we can preserve and protect the state programs that matter most to Alabama.

After all, good government isn't a partisan issue. It's about working together to find solutions that work.

Rep. Darrio Melton of Selma is chair of the House Democratic Caucus.

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