

Tax Increase Just Before County Budget Revision is Disservice

The county council majority voted for a tax increase immediately before our first in-depth budget review in two years. Whatcom County operates on a biennial budget process. We first received new budget numbers from the executive's office the same day as the vote for the tax increase. Less than two months ago the executive said we are in good financial shape in his State of the County Address. Two years ago the economy was robust and we voted for some good, but non-essential items (not mandated and perhaps not the most efficient) that should be reviewed. We also have a hefty reserve fund if there are immediate funding needs before passing a budget.

Because some mental health services are important public health and safety programs we owe it to all county residents, especially mental health consumers to develop mental health funding within our budget process BEFORE ever considering a tax increase.

Our state senators, members of the legislature that cut mental health programs and funding, implored the county council to show real support for mental health services by just passing the tax without a vote of the public. Because of state mental health funding cuts, the county does have more needs. The senators said they passed the buck to give us local control and they claim there is no state money available. If they believe these services are so important, and I do, they could have cut some NON - essential items from the state budget and they could have required complete local control. Even a lowly local official like me knows there is always government waste and the further up the political food chain the bigger the waste. In difficult economic times the public depends on its elected officials to make difficult cuts in non-essential items BEFORE considering tax increases.

The tax increase-based mental health plan was delivered to council a week before introducing the tax increase, full of reasons why these services are needed. I agree with many. It is full of generic language like "supports", "increases", "enhancements", and "creations" but contains only one paragraph descriptions of programs and estimated costs that are not adequately explained. The council hasn't even reviewed it.

If our lives depended on it our council majority could probably find the same amount of money in our existing budget to fund mental health issues that will be available by the tax increase they just passed. Some lives do depend on us funding important services in the most efficient way. Two council members said they didn't think budget cuts would be enough. But some council members have tolerated more non-essential expenditures than others and we haven't even begun our in-depth review. Premature

assumptions create self-fulfilling conclusions. Some mental health services are high priorities, deserving scrutiny NOW within our existing finances, especially since NOW is our mandated opportunity to do so. We could use our healthy reserve fund for any effective concrete programs if they are produced within the two months it will take to review/revise our budget. Or if proponents' claims are accurate that this tax will reduce other funding needs, we should determine where reductions will exist and transfer that money to important mental health needs BEFORE considering tax increases.

Since the council majority passed the tax there is certainly less incentive to make as many hard decisions or disappoint as many supporters of different amenities that exist in the current budget.

Although I have concerns with the plan and tax increase, as an individual I would have supported it if it went on the ballot knowing that if it passed it is the way the public wants it funded. However as a council member it is my job to ensure important services are supported in the most efficient way. When I spend money as an individual, I am responsible for the consequences. If I spend money inefficiently as a council member, all taxpayers are responsible for the consequences.

It is the first time I remember the council ever even considering a tax increase, let alone passing one without an in-depth look at our budget first. It is unfortunate there was a concerted effort to convince caring people the tax increase is the best solution in this economically difficult time.

~Barbara Brenner~

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