

Government should go on a fiscal diet

By Rick Maier

My property taxes went up 23 percent last year. The county wants to raise the sales tax rate by another penny or 17 percent. Excise taxes on gas, airfares, phones, beer and cable keep going up. Federal taxes for social security rise while income tax deductions such as stock loss limits and moving allowances are stuck at ancient ceilings.

Taxpayers are expected to make sacrifices while the government keeps grabbing more and more. When taxpayers feel pressure, we go on a diet. When the government gets out of balance, they buy bigger clothes.

Each dollar we earn is taxed in multiple ways by an unending web of bureaucracies. We pay out much more than what we get in return.

I love living in Georgia, but we may win the award for the most ways to tax the same dollar. My brother lives in Tennessee. He doesn't pay any state income tax. My other brother lives in Delaware where there's no sales tax. Neither has ever heard of paying ad valorem taxes on cars every year.

No doubt there are plenty of important public needs such as education and child welfare, but instead of just steadily increasing taxes, why doesn't the government cut some areas to fund new needs?

Streamlining some departments such as the local permitting process could actually help encourage more commerce, create more jobs and increase the tax base.

You can't tell me that every government employee works hard every day on important things. Does anyone get demoted or fired for lack of performance? Is there any incentive for over-achieving, or does everyone get the same raise regardless of their contribution? Are promotions based on merit or years on the job?

Beware the budget games

One lazy method for cutting expenses is to ask every department to cut the same percent. That's like asking a large group of people to each lose 20 pounds. Not every person – or department - is equally overweight.

Judgement is needed to establish priorities. For example, I would cut 100 percent of the funding for installing those metal sound barriers along the interstate highways. I would spend some of the money on cypress trees, and return the rest by reducing property taxes. (I may be mixing federal and local jurisdictions here, but that's part of the problem, isn't it?)

The only way to fund raises for police, education and public works is to increase the tax base – more businesses and workers in the area. In challenging economic times like these when the base is not growing, raises must come from cuts elsewhere in the department, such as not replacing people who retire. Higher pay must come from increased productivity – performing the same service with fewer people.

The government spends an enormous amount of money administering programs, so the best source for savings is to evaluate what people do. I'd ask every administrative employee: what would happen if you didn't come to work next month, and how does that impact the safety or welfare of the public?

The oldest trick in the budget play book is cutting the most popular program first. Years ago the government threatened to cut funding for PBS, so the public broadcasters decided to fire Big Bird, the viewers' favorite celebrity. Closer to home, the first cuts we see are state parks, library hours and school field trips. We'll teach you to cut our funding!

One thing I don't take for granted is that our local leaders are earnest people. In some parts of the country organized corruption seems prevalent in government.

Still, we need to realign our priorities with our resources and stop raising taxes. As individuals we react by keeping our cars an extra year, delaying retirement, or doing without some things we would really like to have. We should expect the same from our government.

Public leaders: don't make taxpayers sacrifice even more while you ignore the basic inefficiencies inside our aging bureaucracies. The time is right to reassess how our tax dollars are spent and fundamentally restructure the way government is conducted.

Picture of I-475 barriers

Metal sound barriers being constructed along I-475 near Peake Road. Who decided that this was a public priority? How many thousands of miles of walls will be built? Why not plant Cyprus trees? (picture by Maier)