

Rep. Scott Campbell

Death and Taxes

Shortly after the U.S. Constitution was adopted, Benjamin Franklin famously observed, "Our new Constitution is now established, and has an appearance that promises permanency; but in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes."

Two hundred and thirty years later, the appearance of permanency has rarely been so fragile as it is now.

But Death and Taxes continue to provoke fear and dread.

My wife, a hospice care provider, will tell you that death is not the worst thing. We all will do it. A good death is an achievement, like a good life.

As for taxes, a time-worn tactic every election year is to play on the fear and loathing of taxes.

In Vermont we hear the constant cry that we must make Vermont "Affordable." Who could argue? Who wants to make Vermont unaffordable?

But let's be frank. "Affordable" is code for cutting taxes. Cutting taxes means cutting spending. Cutting spending means foregoing more vital services that Vermonters rely on. That's the truth.

In point of fact, cutting spending is devilishly hard to do. Facing an expected deficit due to the pandemic earlier this year, the Administration proposed a 3% across-the-board cut in FY21 (July '20 to June '21).

Sounds responsible. But could we really cut state police coverage, health insurance premiums, required pension payments, and so on, by 3%? No, we can't.

So to get 3% "across the board" other services must be cut more. Which services? That's where the devil lies in the details.

Sounds less responsible now.

In the end, the FY21 budget was saved from major cuts by larger-than-expected revenue from 2019 income taxes (receipts from which were delayed until July), and by receipts from the Federal CARES act.

Building the budget for next fiscal year starts in January, and again is expected to be extremely difficult. House and Senate Appropriations Committees will again be challenged to avoid steep cuts.

The reality is, every year is difficult. Vermont has vital needs that we struggle to serve year after year. Building broadband internet; creating more and better childcare; supporting the State College system; paying off the pension deficit; achieving universal primary-care health insurance; maintaining roads and bridges; cleaning up lakes and rivers; incentivizing the

transition off fossil fuels; building resilience to cope with the changing climate — these aren't just "big government" whims. They are critical to Vermont's future economic and social viability.

So when you hear candidates for public office glibly trumpet "affordability," be suspicious. Cutting taxes sounds good, but who does it benefit most? It benefits the people who pay the most taxes — the wealthiest among us. Who does it hurt the most? First it hurts those of us who rely on various support services. Even more, it hurts all of us who need our government to make strategic investments to build our future.

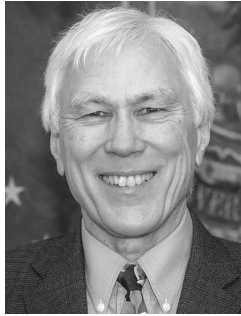
We need those investments to support renewed viability in our small towns and rural areas. We need the infrastructure and amenities that attract and retain young working families. Without them, in 10 years our aging population will make today's budget pressures look quaint by comparison.

One thing I've learned over and over in life, and even more so in public policy: every controversial issue looks like a no-brainer — until you think about it.

We all expect efficient government services. But no one likes paying for them.

Or, as the old song goes, Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die.

That might be a clever quip, but it's not what you would call a plan.



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