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Why we need reform before revenue

By Joan Vennoch, Globe Columnist | March 12, 2009

REFORM before revenue is not a wild and crazy idea.

It's exactly what Massachusetts taxpayers deserve.

During a recent closed-door session to pitch a gas tax hike to state lawmakers, State Transportation Secretary James Aloisi was asked, "What about reform before revenue?" Aloisi shocked his audience by calling the refrain a "meaningless slogan."

Aloisi did damage control after that meeting, putting out a statement that said "the Senate has proposed an extensive set of reforms that the administration fully supports." Yet during a Feb. 25 visit to the Globe, Aloisi also opined that the Senate is "way out of line to say 'reform first.' "

Across the nation and in Massachusetts, people are losing their jobs, retirement savings, and confidence. Bay State residents are also being told they must pay more in taxes to bail out a transportation system that was essentially bankrupted by excessive spending and past mismanagement.

Meanwhile, outrageous cases of state pension abuse continue to make headlines. Lawmakers have passed bills that allow library trustees to win pensions. They have authorized disability pensions for firefighters and police without medical reviews to back them up.

This week, the Globe's Sean Murphy told the story of two town moderators, Robert K. Lamere of Milton and Michael P. Curran of Canton. The two men unashamedly used their political connections to lobby the Legislature for lucrative pension enhancements. State legislators unashamedly came through for them. Lamere has a \$63,000 annual pension, based on 22 years as a town moderator, plus his work as a Big Dig lawyer. For his 10 years as a moderator, plus work as town counsel, Curran gets \$46,500 annually.

Despite public outrage over their windfall, Lamere and Curran have no regrets. "If the system exists, you have the right to take advantage of it. I was entitled to something and I took it," said Curran.

Against that backdrop, Governor Deval Patrick and Democratic lawmakers are considering a range of tax increases, from a hike in the gas tax to increases in the sales or income tax.

They will have a tough time selling any one of those options to an increasingly angry and cynical public, absent evidence of real reform.

"Clearly, you have to have both. You can't have revenue without significant reform," acknowledges Doug Rubin, the governor's chief of staff.

Rubin insists long-delayed reform of the state transportation system is already underway. The Massachusetts Turnpike Authority reduced the number of toll collectors and managers and is saving more than \$31 million, says Rubin. He projects savings of \$3 million to \$5 million once the state switches to more civilian flaggers instead of police details at certain construction sites.

Every penny of Patrick's proposed 19-cent-per-gallon gas tax hike is targeted for a specific purpose. So, Rubin argues that taxpayers can be persuaded it is necessary and should appreciate they have a governor who is "trying to end the culture of not being straight with them."

The governor is also working with House Speaker Robert DeLeo to achieve aggressive pension reform, Rubin promises.

But Patrick must still convince voters to trust him, when they have little reason to trust any Massachusetts politician.

After years of being fleeced by the Big Dig's backers, the average taxpayer wonders: Exactly what constitutes reform?

Does the Patrick administration's proposed merging and purging of various state transportation agencies really add up to reform? Is Aloisi, who was paid huge sums of money to give legal advice to one of those agencies, the best advocate for the deck-shuffling?

There is also good reason to be skeptical of the "reform before revenue" slogan adopted by state lawmakers. For years, they helped politically connected friends manipulate the system. Why should anyone believe these same lawmakers are now willing to shut down the favor bank that Massachusetts taxpayers funded for so long?

Massachusetts does face a genuine fiscal crisis. The transportation system is running on empty.

Leadership does mean standing up for new revenue. But it also means demanding reform, making it happen, and convincing voters it is not a mirage.

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