

OPINION > SENTINEL EDITORIAL

SENTINEL EDITORIAL: The political system needs some temperate help on state spending

Published:

Monday, July 5, 2010 1:20 PM EDT

The other day a man called into WKBK talk radio to complain that New Hampshire's state government spends way too much. The program host asked him, "What would you cut?" The caller replied that Keene's elementary school administrative budget is way too big, based on comparisons with other school districts in New Hampshire, and ought to be pared back..

The man was right about some local school costs being out of whack — the school system's own internal studies have confirmed that administrative staffing hasn't changed over the years as student enrollments have fallen; steps are being taken to correct the situation.

But — forgive us for sounding a bit wonkish — elementary school staffing isn't a function of state spending, which was the subject that prompted the man's call to the radio station; it's determined by local people on local boards.

The caller's apparent confusion on that point reflected either generalized angst about overall tax burdens or political instinct to tar Concord with any problem. But the exchange was instructive, thanks to the host's call for budget specifics.

Anyone who has ever had to grapple with family financial pressures knows that gross generalizations aren't helpful by themselves.

Republican claims that Democrats are profligate spenders may be right, but the criticisms mean nothing without specifics. Yet that's what the state really needs: A believable roster of what services can be cut and what revenues can be raised, plus the consequences — not the tactical political consequences, but the real world impact on people and the economy.

The state hosts a couple of think tanks that are capable of such analysis: the Josiah Bartlett Center for Public Policy and the N.H. Center for Public Policy Studies. Each has some political coloration, depending on one's perspective, but both have the ability to get into the specifics of the state budget.

What of engaging the two groups in a joint study of detailed budget choices — not to argue for this or that particular action, but simply to lay bare the details and specific consequences?

There's precedent for bipartisan analysis of budget priorities: the Concord Coalition, a non-partisan non-government organization that focuses on fiscal decision making at the federal level. Founded in 1992 by former Republican New Hampshire Senator Warren Rudman, Massachusetts Democratic Senator Paul Tsongas and former Commerce Secretary Pete Peterson, the organization tries to provide disciplined perspectives; it looks at specifics.

New Hampshire could use a similar organization, whether a special bipartisan commission along the lines of current panels that are studying the death penalty and gambling, or a combined independent effort by the two think tanks.

The political system, with all its rock throwing, certainly is not likely to come up with a vehicle for reasoned, informed and temperate debate about the state budget on its own. It — and the voters — could use a knowledgeable helping hand.

Copyright © 2010 - The Keene Sentinel

[x] Close Window