



Tuesday, May 26, 2009

Guest column: Oregon needs reform - I'll drink to that!

By **STEVE DUIN**

The Oregonian

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I think I've finally figured out the Democrats' approach to governing when they are in total control of the state Capitol:

Saccus sessio.

That's Latin (or close enough) for "Bag the session."

The six-month legislative gala, it turns out, isn't the time for systemic change or risk-taking. The Salem siesta isn't the occasion to take that long-overdue run at the kicker, the epitome of short-term thinking.

Best I can tell, those 170 days in close quarters are driving reasonably thoughtful men and women to drink ... but not to raise the ridiculously low beer tax. Suitably inspired - or sauced - they're planning to cut Healthy Start of Oregon by more than twice as much (on a percentage basis) as they're cutting the Department of Corrections, which makes a certain savage sense:

If you're not cutting the abuse rate in half for children in at-risk families, as Healthy Start is, you're going to need that bounty of prison beds when those neglected kids turn 18.

Yes, yes, I know: The Legislature faces horrible choices. And it will be saddled with similarly gruesome choices, in future bienniums, until these public servants - and the voters - decide they'd rather carpe diem than saccus sessio.

Let's cut to the chase: Oregon is boxed in by a devastated economy, a vacuous, impotent governor and a self-defeating tax system. Forty-five cents out of every dollar of revenue vanishes in tax breaks. Each time the state economist turns understandably cautious in a budget forecast, Oregon is saddled with a de facto spending cap. Far too many PERS employees are still guaranteed indefensible returns.

The cumulative effect of the state's tax structure, the kicker, and the shift of the tax burden from business to individuals is toxic to education, human services and long-range planning, said Joanne Fuller, director of human services in Multnomah County:

"It's going to take major, sweeping reform to get us out of that. Collectively, we have to persuade the public that the system is broken and it's not serving any of us."

This Legislature is majoring in treading water, not sweeping reform. To help secure \$800 million in additional revenue, it wants to slap a "temporary" income tax surcharge on families making more than \$250,000 a year, presumably because it believes that soak-the-rich strategy has the best shot at surviving referral to our resent-the-rich electorate.

Not a total loss

The session has not been a total loss, although it will deserve that label if legislators refuse, once again, to raise the beer tax. Sen. Mark Hass, D-Beaverton, applauds the progress on health care and an assembly that has "done its best to hold schools harmless during the

worst economy Oregon has seen in a century. If that's all we did, that's a heck of an accomplishment."

Asked about the Legislature's other accomplishments, the Chalkboard Project's Kate Dickson said, "My somewhat diplomatic answer is that I have seen more work and more intention to work together than I have seen in a very long time."

But diligence alone can't overcome the structural flaws in the way Oregon funds essential services. "We cannot solve our intractable issues at the same level of thinking as when we created them," Dickson said.

Rep. Ben Cannon, D-Portland, insists the new wave of talent in Salem has no interest or intention of spending their collective careers dealing with these budget conflagrations every two years.

Previous generations of lawmakers, Hass reminds me, were convinced they could change the world.

Excuse me, then, while I head to the Fulton Pub to toast this generation's resolve, ingenuity and stamina.

Steve Duin is a columnist for The Oregonian

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