

County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania Says State Must Prioritize And Adequately Fund Services

By Douglas E. Hill
Executive Director

There's a budget impasse in Harrisburg, and to listen to the rhetoric on both sides, the lines are clearly drawn. On one side, are those who wish to cut their way to a balanced budget and avoid tax increases, while on the other side are those who are supporting some cuts, some new taxes, and some other one-time funds to balance the budget. You're either for taxes or against them, for necessary services or against them. This is portrayed as the starkest of contrasts, a matter of black and white. But local officials know the current budget impasse isn't that simple, and property taxpayers shouldn't be fooled.

The decisions being made in Harrisburg right now don't just impact the taxes that come directly out of your paycheck. They have the potential to increase property taxes. That's why 48 of Pennsylvania's counties have sent a message to Harrisburg that the state budget must prioritize and adequately fund core government services. They are speaking with a common voice for the protection of property owners throughout the commonwealth.

Commissioners know from experience the local repercussions of the state budget. The difficulty with county budgeting is that it is largely out of the county's control. County government acts as a delivery system for many state services, and in turn, the state is supposed to fund these services. The state is not supposed to issue deep cuts in the interest of balancing its own budget, and then leave local residents to make up the difference.

Our local residents need to understand that, regardless of available funding, counties must investigate potential cases of abuse or neglect, and take action to protect children who are in danger. Counties also have responsibility to care for the mentally ill and individuals with substance abuse problems. If we ignore the problem today, it is likely to re-surface in an admission to the county jail, which disrupts families and results in even greater cost to the taxpayer. Counties are responsible for running our courts, our local prisons, our 911 and emergency management systems, our elections, our record keeping, and many of our economic development and environmental programs.

Some have advocated that counties simply must cut back, and eliminate waste to balance their own budgets. We agree that in tough times, everyone has to tighten their belts and find ways to make ends meet. Counties are doing their part, but they do not have budgetary fat to lose. Many county services are mandates or are part of the social safety net, and simply cannot be cut, legally or morally. Counties have already been squeezed by increased federal and state responsibility passed to the local level, and at the same time state and federal funding has failed to keep up with the growth in costs related to core government services for the last ten years.

So as a local official, when the state doesn't budget its fair share, do you exhaust your reserves, do you cut other services, do you raise taxes, or do you fight for the state to honor its obligations? Commissioners have done all of these to patch the public safety net, which is being stretched and stressed more due to the current state of the economy.

Herein lies the conundrum. State officials clearly have the ability to pass a balanced budget that fails to prioritize spending on behalf of core government services. But when the end result is additional funding responsibility passed to local property owners, the overall tax burden increases. And since the property tax is currently the only revenue source available to counties, it hits local residents regardless of the ability to pay.

When is a no tax increase budget really not what it appears on the surface? When funding for core government services is shifted to the local level, and to local property owners. That's why 48 counties have joined together in formally expressing their opposition to any budget proposal that does not prioritize funding for core government services. County commissioners will continue to fight for the state to honor its obligation, and we urge the public to support this effort.