

We shouldn't waste the time before the budget wars begin again

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As the chances of a special legislative session this fall diminish, Alaskans have some extra time to think about how to fix the state's fiscal future next year.

The Legislature will convene in regular session in less than 90 days and no doubt the budget, public services and long-term finances will dominate the debates – as they should. We've confronted – and at the same time avoided – the problems since the 1990s. The indecision is hurting our communities and Alaska's economic future.

We've put off the decisions in election years for fear of punishment at the polls, and have been unable to solve them in non-election years because too many players are looking ahead to the next campaign.

All the while, the big-number options for balancing spending and revenues are unchanged despite years of arguing, spreadsheets and town halls: Cut state spending on public services; collect taxes from individual Alaskans, non-

resident workers
and/or visitors; increase taxes on oil production; use
Permanent Fund earnings
and adjust the calculation for the annual Permanent Fund
dividend.

People can
talk all they want about railroads to Canada, roads to remote
Alaska mining districts, mythical North Slope natural gas
pipelines and hypothetical benefits of being “open for
business” (whatever that overused slogan means), but the
mathematical
reality is that none of the above politically inflated legends
could ever
produce enough state revenue to avoid the hard decisions on
public services,
taxes and the size of the PFD.

Our
decisions should be based on reality, not dreams.

Those
decisions on public services, taxes and the PFD are
uncomfortable, even painful
to many, and all are politically dangerous, maybe even
politically deadly. But
waiting any longer isn't going to make some new option appear
out of nowhere or
make the problems go away, just like the broccoli isn't going
to disappear from
the 12-year-old's plate no matter how long he avoids it.

The solution
is all of the above (minus the broccoli). Everyone benefits in
the long term if
everyone contributes. The odds of political success are better
if everyone
jumps together.

In the 1969 film, "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid," Robert Redford and Paul Newman survived when they jumped off the cliff together. Sure, they were being chased by a posse for robbing a train – unlike Alaska, which is being chased by fiscal reality – but the solution is the same: Take the leap together.

Which means legislators and the governor – and the public – need to work next year toward a comprehensive plan for a healthy, stable long-term fiscal future for Alaska.

Which means permanently restructuring the dividend formula to an affordable level that can pay Alaskans for decades.

It means spending enough on public services to protect and educate Alaskans, while building for the future, but resisting spending on programs and special projects that are beyond the role of government.

It means looking at a broad-based tax on individuals, so that all Alaskans, and the guests who enjoy and prosper during their time in the state, contribute.

And it means the oil industry should not be excused from the collective answer.

That doesn't

mean expecting the oil industry to solve all our problems with one big check, like the backers of the oil tax initiative promote. The industry knows it will always be a deep pocket in Alaska. What worries the decision-makers in corporate offices is the 40-year history that they are the only pocket we reach into. That attitude among many Alaskans, and the resulting fear among the industry, is destructive of future investment.

Our best hope is that the higher-oil-taxes-solve-everything lobby, the don't-touch-my-PFD lobby, the no-new-taxes lobby, and the cut-spending lobby will put down their signs, stifle their campaign rhetoric, stop their Facebook attacks and find an all-of-the-above compromise.

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