

# Our Point of View

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## No way to legislate

The 2017 legislature convened in a fiscal hole and ended that way. Post session the hole appears to be growing deeper. With the exception of a necessary increase in motor fuels taxes, legislators refused to fix our state's deficit with revenue enhancements (you may call them tax increases) of any sort. In the past two sessions, legislators have chosen to cut and vacancy-save their way out of deficit...and when feeling particularly capricious, chosen to create unaffordable, even unconstitutional, tax credits and loop holes.

Grim.

Certain state employees are taking a hit right now. Courtesy of SB 261, a bill crafted in the dark of night late in the session bereft of purposeful public review and comment, if future revenue falls short of certain benchmarks, then program cuts and RIFs will automatically happen. State funded programs and services the public expects will go away, including publicly funded private health care. More cuts will come if the next legislature is like this one and the one before it and the one before it rolling right on back in time. We have been traveling backwards down the wrong revenue road for years.

The 2017 legislature did in a depressingly familiar and frustrating way "save" the state employee pay plan we negotiated – a last-minute rescue of a tiny, inflation battered pay increase of 1%/1% not to be realized until February in each of the next two years. Worse than that is the grubby fact that the last four legislatures failed to adopt the pay plan we bargained in good faith with the governor. To continue to do what we have been calling pre-budget negotiations is to continue to demonstrate at least one definition of insanity. Consequently, delegates to the annual meetings of MEA-MFT and Montana Public Employees Association have directed us to find another way to get to YES on state employee pay.

The legislature was no kinder to the Montana University System. As I write, the MUS appears poised to offer university employees at the bargaining table 0%/1% or maybe even 0%/0% for the next two years! Tuition increases are coming. Tuition increases may be justified, but the MUS really needs to get serious about providing well-advertised, up front student grants and scholarships across the board. Student debt and threat thereof kill enrollment. And then there is the University of Montana on the ropes.

Come November 2018, Montana

voters will once again enjoy the decennial opportunity to REAUTHORIZE the 6-mill statewide property tax levy to help fund the MUS. \$21 million in annual revenue is at stake. I expect the voters to do better by their university system than the legislature. But what if they don't?

Given the uncertainty of our legislature's commitment to state funded public employees, right now why would anyone seek a career at the Montana Historical Society or Department of Public Health and Human Services or the University of Montana? In the hands of an anti-tax, anti-spend, anti-government legislature, these great institutions and others look to be career killers. New aspirants: Apply for work at your own risk.

This is no way to legislate.

Yes, k-12 suffered licks as well. But the legislature did create a first-time ever sustainable ongoing path to maintain and refurbish local school district facilities. Further the legislature expanded local school district budget authority and promised greater state guaranteed tax base aid down the road. Whoa. Despite a significant shift in taxes from the state to local school communities, school funding, never extraordinary, looks to be in better shape than state government.

Meanwhile MEA-MFT and MPEA are moving on to far better than what we are now. We both exist for the same purpose, the same public employees doing work that matters everywhere in Montana. We have worked side by side for years and years. Bigger, merged together, we will work ever harder to turn this starboard listing legislative ship around. And we will send a message of smart union solidarity across the NEA/AFT nation.

Stay tuned. 🗨️