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ult Not Mandate For Raising Taxes

The Capital Times :: EDITORIAL :: 9A

Saturday, February 28, 2004

Kathleen M. Falk, Dane County executive

Dear Editor: Here are some facts that The Capital Times should consider before it characterizes the failed casino referendum as a mandate for raising taxes.

With the state biennial budget, the county lost -- was cut by the state -- \$8 million. About two-thirds of those cuts are to human services.

Yet another fiscal mess is developing at the state level in the form of a \$500 million deficit, mostly in state and federal funding of Medicaid/human services. Because these programs are delivered at, and are partially funded at, the county level, this may well mean more revenue cuts to our county. It certainly means there is no chance of any of last year's cuts being restored.

Early reports on the federal budget point to freezes and cuts in federal human services. The result will be more pressure on county human services.

Consequently, it is going to be extremely difficult to maintain county human services without new revenues.

Despite The Capital Times' goal of fair, progressive taxation, which I share, those options do not and will not exist at the county level. The property tax is not progressive. We are at our statutory limit on the sales tax. The "wheel tax" received only five out of 37 votes when the County Board voted on it last fall. There is no other means of new revenues.

I have had a clear and honest standard in limiting property taxes. I don't make misleading reference to mill rates (which in growing communities almost always decline with no fiscal discipline required). I hold property tax increases to a percentage equal to inflation plus the rate of population growth.

Last year, for the first time, I exceeded that rate, by 1 percent, in order to preserve human services. I don't recall any huge groundswell of support for that position. Where was The Capital Times editorial on that decision? I heard from those really struggling to pay their property taxes. Most folks told me they understood it was a tough but reasonable call in a very tough budget year. They also expressed the hope we would not have to have such an increase again.

I completely accept the voters' decision on the casino. I think I also understand it pretty well. For a mix of reasons, a strong majority of Dane County voters decided they don't want a casino. Period. Reading the referendum results as support for higher property taxes or new types of taxes is wrong.

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