

Don't expect a budget resolution anytime soon

Those interested in how Michigan's budget crisis is going to turn out are in for a long wait. I don't expect Gov. Jennifer Granholm and the Legislature to finally resolve the \$1.8 billion deficit for the fiscal year that begins this October until the very last moment.

To understand why, you need only to identify the powerful interests whose oxen were gored by Granholm's initial budget proposal and to watch how these interests will be lobbying the Legislature to staunch the wounds. Consider this very noninclusive list:

- Organized labor, which represents thousands of state employees whose wage increases are now at risk from Granholm's budget cuts.
- Michigan's 16 public universities and 29 community colleges, whose appropriations have already been cut by 3.5 percent and which face another 6.5-percent cut in the governor's proposed budget.
- The families of thousands of Michigan high school seniors who scored well on the MEAP test and who had expected thereby to earn a \$2,500 state-funded scholarship to college. Gov. Granholm's budget proposes to cut this to \$500.

These are nontrivial constituencies, and there are many, many more, all screaming bloody murder. The lobbying intensity, not to mention the partisan disagreements between Democrat Granholm and the GOP-dominated Legislature, will be intense, time-consuming and very, very political.

Another factor, less immediately obvious, is the peculiar pressure-cooker atmosphere that pervades the six square blocks around the state Capitol. Simply put, this atmosphere is at once completely consumed with politics and entirely insular. Legislators typically arrive in Lansing in time for session on Tuesday morning. They then spend literally all their time in the cut and thrust of legislative politics — hearings, caucuses, phone calls, meetings, wheels and deals — until they go home at the end of the day Thursday or Friday morning. Nothing other than political survival matters, nothing else intrudes.

In this frenzied atmosphere, certain assumptions that have no particular validity in the real world (i.e., any place other than the Capitol) are without question accepted as dogma. One example is the assumption that the political conflict over abortion is at the center of morality for all people. Another is that taxes can never be increased, no matter what.

That latter article of faith will become a dominant factor during the budget negotiations. How come? Because it's pretty clear that the process of resolving the budget crisis will involve at least two distinct steps:

- 1) Loud and ceaseless wailing and gnashing of teeth by the various constituencies whose programs/pet projects are being cut, to the point that legislators and the governor throw up their hands in despair at ever being able to craft a budget that distributes an acceptable (maybe even fair?) level of pain to all concerned.
- 2) The sudden realization that one simple step — delaying the scheduled reductions of the state income tax by 0.1 percent increments — will produce hundreds of millions in extra annual revenue. It does not take legislative genius to realize that the extra money would go a long way to solving the budget crisis and even save some important programs that would otherwise be killed or maimed. But this realization will inevitably be accompanied by loud cries that such a step amounts to a tax increase and that doing so amounts to certain political suicide.

Here's how the numbers work. The current state income tax rate is 4.1 percent of adjusted taxable income. As a result of tax cutting legislation passed during the Engler years, that rate is scheduled to go down to 4 percent during fiscal 2003 and to 3.9 percent in fiscal 2004. The math gets complicated because of the difference between calendar year (used for tax purposes) and the state's fiscal year (which starts on Oct. 1). The bottom line is that if the scheduled tax reductions for 2003 and 2004 are deferred, the result is around \$400 million in extra revenue for the state.

So the gut check will be whether the no-tax article of faith that drives so many decisions in a homocentrically scaled and increasingly frantic Legislature makes any difference at all to most folks who live or work outside the Capitol building in Lansing. For an individual taxpayer with a \$40,000 taxable annual income, a tax rate reduction of 0.1 percent works out to about \$40 a year, less than a buck a week. Is this something that will cause ordinary citizens to go to the barricades? I doubt it.

Of course, some Lansing insiders will argue that deferring a scheduled reduction in the rate of the income tax is just the same as a tax increase. Maybe, but I hope such Jesuitical logic doesn't cut much ice.

Phil Power is the chairman of the board of the company that owns this newspaper. He would be pleased to get your reactions to this column either at (734) 953-2047 or at ppower@hometownlife.com.

Laughter, reminders of spring come on the eve of war in Iraq

"The opposite of war isn't peace, it's creation."
— from the rock opera *Rent*

What do we say?

My daughter was preparing last Wednesday night to fly from Minneapolis to the East Coast. At 6:50 p.m. our time, I left a voice mail message to wish her a wonderful trip, hoping she wouldn't cancel at the last minute out of fear for what might happen on Thursday.

It was hard not to be afraid, what with the all-news stations running their countdown clocks and announcers letting us know we should be prepared to seal ourselves inside if The Worst happens.

She would be gone four days.

Maybe by the time she's in Maryland, I thought, it will have started. Maybe she'll have to stay out there a while, until the world settles into whatever rhythm remains in the wake of war's steady drumbeat.

"I love you, sweetie," I said. Sometimes she saves my messages. I hope she saves that one.

What can we do?

After work on most Wednesdays, I meet with a young man who loves biology and math. We talk about school and his classes and spelling tests. He brings homework when he has some, other times we play Hangman.

He's not crazy about reading, but I'm working on him.

The Farmington Youth Authority's after-school mentoring program gives kids a little extra boost with homework help and study skills. I was asked to do a story last year and ended up volunteering, because it seemed like a meaningful way for me to give a little back to a community that has done so much for me.

Truthfully, I get a lot more than I give.

Last Wednesday night, the 90 minutes passed quickly with a math game that seemed like *Sensible*, except it's even more difficult to come up with equations that don't run into each other. When the game got to be a bit much, he asked whether we could play catch, and we did.

Outside, gray storm clouds gathered, and the evening air took on a chill. Traffic on Grand River rushed by as I headed back toward my office to catch up on a few last-minute deadline details.

I have learned it is better to fill my life with times to be somewhere, doing something. Days when one appointment overlaps the next leave little time for useless worrying

about war and people who don't care whether they die for the cause they represent.

A friend looked at my calendar last week and shook her head.

"You're overlooked," she said.

"And that's the way I like it," I replied.

Where can we go?

Several times during the week, cars line Thomas Street behind the Farmington United Methodist Church. Along the back of the building, through a row of large windows, you can watch what's going on in the brightly-lit basement. Sometimes, there's an exercise class, sometimes people are sharing a meal or snack.

But people are always smiling and laughing, always standing close to each other. There's a touch on the arm, a warm hug to show friendship and concern.

This church is like every other house of worship, places where we go to find reassurance and hope. Together, we talk to God of Many Names and ask for peace that, even when it's granted, never seems to last long in our world.

When one dictator is silenced, another emerges. When atrocities in one war-torn country end, another genocide begins.

There are other gathering places less spiritual — local pubs and restaurants, coffee shops, the library, places where everything seems normal, where life moves at the same pace it always has.

At 7:15 p.m. last Wednesday, only a few cars pass the window of our Grand River office. Time to head home.

What happens next?

The moment I opened the front door, I knew something was different.

A bright bouquet of flowers sat on the graphomola; next to them, an envelope with my name on it. The card inside reminded me how much better my life is today than it has ever been, and how much more joy the future holds.

My Best Friend has a busy life, but always finds the time to brighten my day. When I'm busy, he brings me lunch. When I'm sad, he'll stop by with a hug and sometimes even a little chocolate.

On a very strange night in our country's history, he gave me a little glimpse of spring, in a vase he'd set on top of a roll of duct tape.

So last Wednesday, I wasn't watching when Saddam Hussein's time ran out. Instead, I called my mother. And we talked and laughed for more than an hour.

Joni Hubred is editor of the Farmington Observer. She welcomes your comments in person or by mail at 3341 Grand River, Farmington, MI 48335, by phone, (248) 477-5450, by fax, (248) 477-9722, or via e-mail, jhubred@hometownlife.com.



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