

Contra Costa Times Editorial: It's time for California's lawmakers to end partisan bickering and solve budget mess – now

MediaNews editorial
01/31/2009

TODAY, California has become a national embarrassment. We have become the poster child for dysfunctional government.

Our elected representatives have failed us miserably by their inability to pass even an interim budget by today's deadline. Instead, senseless bickering and ideological zealotry have blocked progress on finding a workable solution to the state's projected \$42 billion deficit over the next 18 months.

That is why we are taking the rare step of placing our editorial opinion on the front page.

As a result of our government's irresponsible actions, California cannot afford to pay its bills, forcing the treasury to default on the state's obligations and to start issuing IOUs. That is a disgrace that should have every Californian as furious as we are.

It is time for all California residents to take action by calling their legislators to demand swift action on a workable budget solution.

It is also time for some political courage among all 120 members of the Legislature. It is irresponsible for 116 lawmakers to sit back and allow four legislative leaders and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to make all the substantive budget decisions.

The Republican minority in the Legislature, which has the power to block passage of a budget, needs to break away from its ridiculously rigid pledge to never — ever — vote for any tax increase. They also need to focus on the budget and not use their leverage to push other agendas.

It is true that overspending is the chief reason California is in such a fiscal swamp, but these are not normal times. The national economy is in turmoil, and there is no way the state can provide even bare essential services without an increase in revenues.

But make no mistake, Democrats also share the blame for their unwillingness to place controls on spending increases and to make enough painful but necessary spending reductions.

What too many of our lawmakers fail to grasp is that real compromise, not ideological purity or satisfying the demands of special interests, is necessary for good government.

It does not take a political genius to understand how California got into such a fiscal mess or even how to get out of it. But it does take political courage, and not just from the leadership, but from every member of the Legislature as well as the governor.

As long as we are demanding a solution to the state's budget crisis, we feel obligated to offer the framework for one.

Adopt the \$16.5 billion in budget cuts proposed by the governor a month ago. School spending would be reduced to the minimum required by Proposition 98. State workers would be furloughed two days a month. Welfare spending would be cut back about 10 percent, as would higher education funding, for 18 months.

On the revenue side, permanently reinstate the car tax, which would raise \$6 billion a year. In addition, levy a temporary income surtax, which is far more fair than a sales tax increase, for two to three years.

Lawmakers should approve placing a measure on the ballot creating a real spending cap based on inflation and population growth, which could be overridden by a two-thirds vote in an emergency, and set aside a substantial reserve fund to be used only in times of a weak economy.

We must establish two-year budgeting and long-range fiscal planning using independent financial analysis.

There is no good reason why such a plan could not be pieced together in a timely manner. In the meantime, an interim budget is needed right now. Compromise is the key — use it.