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BALLOT TITLES AND THE BUDGET

What November's ballot won't tell you

On Tuesday, Bill Sizemore's measure to allow an unlimited deduction of federal taxes on Oregon income tax returns — a repeat of a measure Oregon voters defeated in 2000 — qualified for the November ballot. Sizemore's measure will join, among other things, Kevin Mannix's measure to impose mandatory minimum prison sentences for certain property crimes. What the two ballot titles won't tell voters is what impact either measure would have on education, health care, senior services and child protective services in Oregon. But, in fact, the measures will divert money that would otherwise be spent on those services.

Sizemore's measure would reduce the amount of money in the state general fund — by \$550 million in the 2009-11 biennium and by \$1.75 billion in the 2011-13 biennium. The bulk of that money would go to the wealthiest people in the state. The average tax cut for people in the top 1 percent of earnings would be more than \$15,000, while the average for people in the middle 20 percent would be \$1.

Mannix's measure would increase spending on prisons by \$250 million to \$400 million a biennium. Since Mannix's measure is an unfunded mandate, that increase would have to be paid for by reducing the amount of money that would otherwise be spent on other general fund services.

Now, "general fund" is a rather vague name. But as it happens, the general fund is spent on a few pretty concrete things. For practical purposes, the general fund and the state lottery (which is about one-twelfth the size of the general fund) are lumped together. The current general fund/lottery budget is divided as follows:

- 54.3 percent goes to education (mostly K-12 schools).
- 15.8 percent goes to public safety and

the justice system (prisons, state police, the courts).

- 22.7 percent goes to human services (the biggest chunk being regular old health care, but also including care for seniors — such as assisted living — and child protective services).

- 7.2 percent goes to everything else (environmental and natural resources — such as state parks — economic development, the Legislature itself, the Department of Revenue and the rest of state government).

What do those numbers mean? They mean that it's not possible to slash taxes for wealthy people or to spend lots of new money on prisons without affecting education, health care, senior services and child welfare. Repeat: It's *not possible* to slash taxes for wealthy people or to divert

money to prisons, without affecting education, health care, senior services and child welfare.

That's not spin; it's arithmetic. There simply isn't enough "other" spending to cut. The *entire* "other" budget for 2007-09 is less than the amount of the Sizemore tax cut, once it's fully implemented.

Now, why won't the ballot tell people that these measures affect education and health care? By tradition, the "ballot titles" address the things a measure *says* it will do, but devote little if any attention to the trade-offs a measure will force. That's a disservice to voters. When measures, as these do, have clear, unavoidable and significant effects on vital services, the ballot itself should provide that information — a surgeon general's warning, if you will.

The next Legislature should change the ballot title law to ensure that next time, Oregon's voters get that critical information upfront.



STEVE NOVICK

IN MY OPINION

Steve Novick, an unsuccessful candidate for the Democratic U.S. Senate nomination, lives in Southeast Portland.

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