

Real Ohio Leaders Wouldn't Wait to Fix Budget

October 5, 2010

Matt A. Mayer

During your annual physical, your doctor detects a lump in a lymph node. The biopsy indicates an aggressive cancer in an advanced stage. Your doctor recommends immediate surgery, followed by chemotherapy.

But your family has a big trip planned, which has been in the works for years. Delaying your treatment until after the trip might allow the cancer to spread, making your condition much worse. What would you do?

Whether Ohio's projected budget deficit is \$6 billion or \$8 billion, state elected officials face a similarly drastic choice, which will cause real pain to Ohioans. Yet you likely haven't heard any of them talking about doing anything until next year.

That shows how little leadership we get from politicians of both parties.

We are four months into the new fiscal year. If we know we will need to make tough choices in 2011, why not use the time left in the current budget year to start building reserves that can help balance the next budget? Acting now will cause less pain for all Ohioans later.

The choice is simple: Spread the budget pain over 32 months, or waste the next eight months and squeeze all of the pain into the two years that start next July 1. The first option would lessen the severity of the solutions, so Ohioans wouldn't suffer as much.

Why isn't anyone talking about this? Because Ohio's leaders appear too small for the task at hand. The legislative committee charged with coming up with ideas to balance the budget didn't meet for the first time until the end of July.

Would former governor Jim Rhodes and former House speaker Vern Riffe have waited until a crisis was upon them to act?

There is a reason the tallest buildings in Columbus bear their names.

The Ohio Constitution says the "governor on extraordinary occasions may convene the General Assembly by proclamation." Gov. Ted Strickland should do just that, calling on state lawmakers to spread deficit-reduction measures over almost three years instead of just two.

Governor Strickland and many lawmakers are running for re-election. How could they make a better case for new terms than by getting off the campaign trail and

returning to Columbus to work hard to minimize our collective pain — spending days, nights, and weekends working on our behalf, until they agree on the fixes needed to get Ohio back on track?

Let's have the big battle now. The only reason to wait is so that the people who want to make decisions next year don't have to do that before Election Day.

That isn't leadership. It's politics as usual, which got us into this financial mess.

Ohioans need something more.

And it isn't rocket science. Balancing the next budget will require cuts in government compensation and spending, higher taxes, or both. Groups such as the Center for Community Solutions, Greater Ohio, and the Buckeye Institute have proposed options for elected officials to choose from, complete with estimated savings.

We can quibble about the various deficit estimates over the months to come, but only at a very high price.

Putting the governor's office and General Assembly to work now to define the severity of the problem and to identify solutions will make the bitter medicine a lot easier to swallow.

Acting now also will send a strong message to Ohio businesses that politicians are ready to make the same tough choices business owners have had to make over the past two years.

The Buckeye Institute's recent poll of 1,800 registered voters shows that Ohioans want big fixes.

There is no better time for these fixes than right now.

Dealing with the deficit today will stop the bleeding and put Ohio on the road to recovery sooner rather than later. It's how real leaders emerge.

Who wants to lead Ohio?

Matt A. Mayer is president of the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions, a Columbus-based think tank that emphasizes economic freedom, job creation, and government accountability.

Copyright © 2010, The Toledo Blade