

Chicago Tribune

December 28, 2011

Cutting wasteful spending a priority for 2012

By Cal Thomas

According to the Mayan “long count” calendar, the final day on Earth is less than a year away, on Dec. 21, 2012.

While we wait to see if that apocalypse occurs, a more reliable prediction includes an end of a different sort. The economic stimulus pipeline from Washington to the states is about to run dry. This means many governors can be expected to ask their legislatures, or voters, to raise taxes for “essential” programs. To government, all programs are “essential.”

According to the National Taxpayers Union (NTU), Washington state is planning to put a tax-increase proposal on its ballot in March, while California voters are likely to vote in November on raising taxes. California is a certifiably insolvent state. It is in deep debt because Democratic politicians won't stop spending, not because taxpayers aren't paying their “fair share.”

We are hearing — or will soon hear — that state governments have cut spending to the bone and disaster will occur if more is cut. It's never true, but fear has always worked to squeeze more money out of the people who earn it.

True, Medicaid continues to be the main driver behind state spending, but that's a reason for fixing what ails Medicaid, not pouring more money into it.

Consider construction projects, which are snarling traffic around the country. According to a study by 22 Gannett

newspapers, published earlier this month in USA Today, “The federal government spends \$40 billion a year on highway construction but does not track how many projects are over budget, how much goes toward overruns or whether the record is getting better or worse. The result is a patchwork pattern of planning lapses and design errors that sends some states back for more money again and again ...”

In Connecticut, what critics call the “busway boondoggle” finds Gov. Dan Malloy, a Democrat, doubling down on a half-billion-dollar project to create bus service between Hartford and New Britain. Republican state Sen. Joe Markley notes buses between the suburbs and Hartford are “a lonely ride” and adds, “I don't believe there is overwhelming need for more buses when the ones we have aren't being used.” What a novel thought.

It's that way in many states as politicians spend federal money on wasteful and unnecessary projects and when the money runs out claim granny will be thrown off a cliff if state taxpayers don't pony up for “essential” programs.

Here's one I'll bet you didn't know. Last week, the local news in Washington, D.C., showed pictures of a major water-main break in suburban Maryland. It seems to happen a lot, not only in the Washington area but, according to NTU, hundreds of times each year around the country. NTU estimates the breaks

cost taxpayers \$3 billion annually, not counting costs associated with traffic tie-ups, emergency equipment, lost time and depleted water supplies.

What could be done to save money when it comes to broken water mains? Corrosion is the main cause of the breaks due to old metallic pipes. NTU estimates the broken pipes are a \$50.7 billion drain on the economy, not including the cost from lost water due to leaking or broken pipes.

Utilities have generally replaced old corroded pipes with new ones made of the same or similar materials, which also corrode. Other non-corrosive options are available, and NTU estimates they could save between 30 percent and 70 percent on capital improvement plans. Since localities spent \$103 billion on water supply and sewerage programs in 2009, that's a lot of savings. Read all about it at ntu.org.

All governments should be regularly audited by outside auditors. Their sole interest should be saving taxpayers money. Any program or agency that wastes money ought to be updated or eliminated. If taxpayers don't force big government at the state and federal levels to go on a diet, the bloating will only continue to the detriment of our economic health.

Cal Thomas is a syndicated columnist and author.