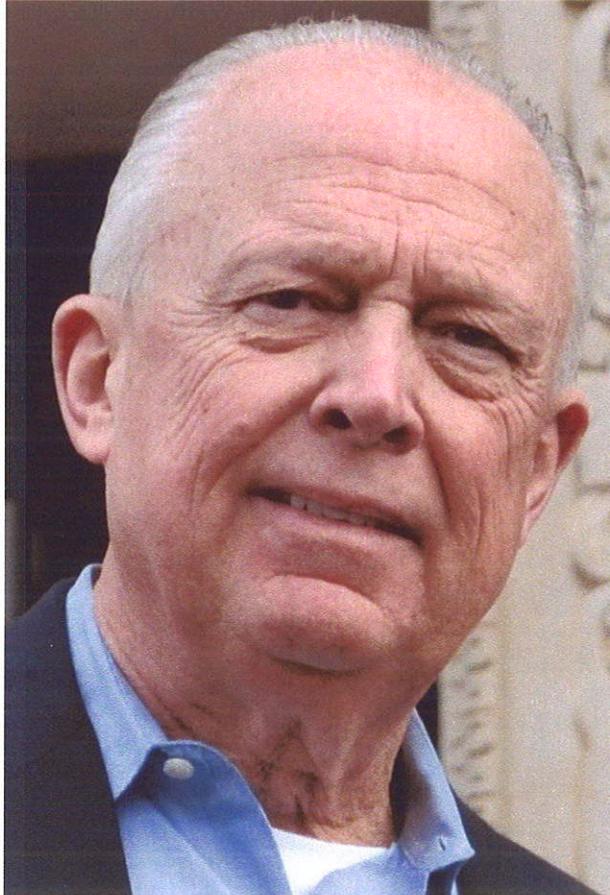


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## Richard Eckstrom Guest Column: Nuggets of advice for taxpayers

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Richard Eckstrom

Over the next several weeks, men and women aspiring to elected office will likely be filling up your mailbox and knocking on your door. Many will talk of “protecting the taxpayers,” or offer some similar claim in pursuit of your vote.

Of course, “protecting the taxpayers” can mean any number of things, and candidates tend to offer scant details. The discerning voter would be wise to press candidates to elaborate.

For those who are serious about protecting people’s wallets, I wish them the best. And I offer a few nuggets of insight – four keys, in my opinion, to serving the taxpayers well:

- Have the backbone to say “no.” All politicians talk about opposing wasteful spending. Yet if you were to

look over any city, county or state budget, you'd easily spot items the average person would consider frivolous. So how do they get there?

The truth is that saying "no" to budget waste sometimes requires backbone. Just about every budget item, no matter how frivolous, has a beneficiary. There's someone somewhere who wants the item, and they'll lobby, pressure, cajole and argue that a particular expenditure has some vital function. Perhaps it'll be a "special interest group" armed with deep pockets and a knowledge of how to work the system. Caving can seem politically expedient, while it can take political courage to say "no."

- **Save through streamlining and consolidation.** If you've ever run a business, you know it can be necessary to weed out unnecessary costs -- like overhead -- just to keep the doors open. But that same incentive doesn't exist in government because governments don't go out of business. The result is often an operational structure that wouldn't last in the private sector -- excessive bureaucracy, duplication of functions or general ineffectiveness. In my experience, just about every public entity has room to become more efficient; there are savings to be achieved through streamlining operations -- for example, merging overlapping functions or using technology to increase productivity.

Of course, government is good at resisting change. There will be people within the system who will push back against what they see as encroachment onto their "turf." Nonetheless, good stewardship calls for continuously striving for greater efficiency. Good luck to those who take on the challenge.

- **Broaden the revenue base.** If you've ever chipped in with others on a purchase -- say, a gift for a friend -- you know that the more people who chip in, the less everyone individually pays. Applied to government, that means one way to lighten the load for taxpayers is to have more people and businesses on the tax rolls.

The most obvious way to expand the tax base is to recruit new businesses. But it may also be beneficial to take stock of your government's overall revenue structure -- specifically, its policies on special tax breaks for various businesses and interest groups. Many governments offer tax exemptions, abatements and incentives, usually as an economic recruitment tool. But their merits can be difficult to measure, and there's a big downside: They contribute to a narrowing of the tax base and a heavier-than-necessary burden on "Joe Taxpayer." The conscientious public official will be mindful of the pinch tax exemptions put on people's wallets -- and perhaps pump the breaks on these breaks. At the least, they should be subject to regular reviews to determine whether the benefits justify the cost to taxpayers.

- **Practice transparency, oversight and accountability.** The greater the transparency and oversight, the fewer the opportunities for waste and abuse -- two problems which potentially pinch wallets. Unfortunately, those good-government ideals don't always get the emphasis they deserve. The

candidate who honestly champions open, accountable government would be filling a valuable niche and serving the taxpayers well.

Make sure financial information such as spending records and vendor contracts are publicly available and that decisions are made in public view rather than behind closed doors. Open-government is the watchdog that ensures government's actions square with citizens wishes.

Fiscal oversight should be a priority, not an afterthought. Make sure there are stringent financial controls in place to discourage misspending and to catch it when it does occur. Establish standardized, clearly spelled-out procedures for purchases and for awarding contracts.

It's easy to talk about protecting people's wallets. Matching those words with deed can be a steep, uphill fight. My hat's off to all who run for office to make a genuine difference.

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