

A sales tax for an educated workforce?

- Aug 28, 2017

Thursday night's "anti-sales tax" rally at the Library, at the invitation of Vicki Kissack and others, provided a forum for a widely varying set of views.

Vicki says she is affiliated with the recently invented "John Patriot" group, apparently a Tea Party wannabe movement. I don't want much truck with the group but I have to thank Vicki for inviting the community to a vigorous debate, and also thank her for a fair and entertaining job as moderator.

The evening was a success. Scott Clem reflexively opposes taxes and Dr. Mark Englert, President of Gillette college, is searching for funds to replace massive budget cuts.

The college needs a stable funding base. The local economic development group is searching for ways to use coal for purposes other than shipping it somewhere else to be burned.

Other sources of public funding are down, so the college and the economic development group are jointly proposing, with city and county support, a ballot initiative for a one-quarter percent (25 cents per one hundred dollars) sales tax. (If you buy a \$60,000 Cadillac, this additional tax would be, on top of the 5 percent tax at \$3,000, \$150.)

On a coin toss, the selected panelists of anti-tax speakers started out. Mr. Clem repeatedly praised the role of the college as generating the work force this community so desperately needs if we are to (1) keep our children in Wyoming and (2) provide workers for new economic enterprises. But he can't stand taxes.

John Patriot Inc., presumably trying to find a suitably qualified academic to stand against the articulate, passionately pro-student Dr. Englert, reached all the way to Sweden (where income taxes are much higher) to hire an economist of unspecified

credentials, Mr. Sven Larson, to weigh in. If Mr. Larson has a PhD or even any degree is unknown. Mr. Larson smacks of being a huckster, persuasively conjuring nightmare scenarios if this tax is imposed on struggling business enterprises while the Legislature is about to crush us all with new taxes. OMG, we can't have this one! Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!

If we run in fear from imagined possibilities every day, we may as well just stay home with the covers pulled up. Or, maybe instead we should be bold.

Mr. Clem, Mr. Larson and a couple of audience participants suggested that the college needs to cut back, let the lawns turn brown, let the trash overflow, overwork the faculty, quit building arenas. Oh sure, in a community with the Wyoming Center, the Rec Center, a nice airport, remodeled City Hall, etc., let's try to attract students to a trashed out college. Really? The new sports arena and the rodeo center are magnets to keep students in Wyoming instead of seeing them go to Montana or Nebraska.

Students rent apartments, buy food and gas, get their cars fixed, get part-time jobs and contribute to the local economy. And if they are trained to be nurses, welders, IT experts, marketers, maybe there will be enough trained work force to attract new employers.

The evening featured a free-for-all about tax policy. Wyoming has the lowest sales tax and the lowest property tax in the Rockies. My thought: taxes, like insurance, are a way of spreading the burden of providing essential public services. But my response was made completely irrelevant by an event which had the remarkable effect of unifying the room:

Paul Hladky stood up and asked a number of questions, mainly rhetorical, about the local economy and the role of the college in economic diversification. Mr. Hladky and his family, in case someone does not know, have donated millions of dollars to the college. They largely funded the arena named after his father, funded scholarships, funded the

new science and technology center on Highway 59 in the former Brad Ragan tire shop and bought the Barlows' 38 acres east of the college for expansion.

Mr. Larson, who I am sure is still licking his wounds, responded to Paul Hladky's comments by stating: "Well if you like the college so much, why don't you write a big fat check?" The room exploded in laughter and derision. Oops, dude, you picked the wrong target. It was side-splitting. All but a few grumps in the room erupted in sustained laughter.

In the lawsuit business in which I make a living, expert witnesses are vitally important. We joke that an expert is someone from more than 50 miles away who charges by the hour but he may not know Shinola from that other stuff. That would be Mr. Larson. Thank you, sir, for coming into our community to enlighten us. Don't let the door hit you in the, well, the posterior.

The bottom line: This is a strong, resilient community. We turn out for charity dinners and we support our local retailers. We supported the Wyoming Center, the Rec Center, AVA, the 1 Percent Tax, the Mayor's Art Council. Isn't this community so rich for all of those things?

I don't know if anyone recorded this event, but the two highlights were Scott Clem's repeated statements praising the college before he dithered off into why we should not financially support it, and Mr. Larson's legendary faux pas. The dictionary defines faux pas as "a severe social blunder." Indeed.

It is easy to be against something. It is rewarding to be for something.

RT Cox is an attorney in Gillette.