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To fix state budget, listen to the people

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The people get it.

To survive, Michigan has to remake state government with a mix of painful restructuring and tax reform. It's not an either/or proposition, something you can solve with bumper-sticker logic like "no new taxes" or "protect public employees." It's a both/and that requires a nuanced effort to get spending under control and stabilize revenues to pay for the things that matter, like education and roads.

So if the people understand that, what's holding up reform in Lansing?

Polling conducted by EPIC/MRA and released by the Free Press last weekend shows that public understanding of the state's crisis is more sophisticated than most legislators think. By large margins, the people want to buy out older, expensive public employees and require those who remain to pay a heftier share of their health care costs. Nearly 60% backed a current proposal to raise employee contributions to 20% across the board.

But Michiganders also support (though by not as large a margin) an expansion of the sales tax to apply to such services as haircuts, auto repair and legal assistance, and they support using the new money to prevent further cuts in education.

They support the service tax even more strongly if it's paired with an elimination, three years down the road, of the millstone business tax surcharge.

Just as important, the poll contains data that suggest Michiganders don't want to solve our problems by crippling government altogether.

They oppose, just slightly, a proposal to cut pay for public employees and, specifically, school teachers and university employees.

And people are far more concerned about state government improving the economy and education than they are about controlling taxes.

The poll results ought to land like a two-by-four upside the heads of the leadership trio in Lansing, which has talked reform for years but allowed the phony choice of cuts versus taxes to hobble every proposal before it even got out of the gate.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm spent seven years resisting dramatic changes to the cost of public employee benefits, saying essentially that she wouldn't gore that Democratic ox without Republican cooperation on

tax reform. Finally, in her last year in office, she has put forth significant reforms (which include the 20% health premium co-pay) and taken command of the high road in the debate.

But Senate Majority Leader Mike Bishop remains ensconced in myopic partisanship, insisting that he can't muster a single vote for a tax increase, and that tax reform is just a euphemism for a heavier burden on businesses and families.

The poll directly contradicts his position, though. Voters aren't taking that kind of hard line. So what's the basis on which the Republican Senate caucus is doing so?

The poll is an opportunity for both sides to relinquish a little without appearing to give in to anyone but the people themselves.

The results also ought to help inform the pool of gubernatorial hopefuls on both sides of the aisle. The people don't want sides or bickering or posturing. They want results that will reshape state government without destroying investment in the things that matter.

The people get it.

We just need Lansing to follow suit.

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