

VILLAGE VIEW

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Along with the chance to cast ballots for their choices of candidates ranging from President of the United States to sheriff of Barnstable County in the coming November 4th election, Massachusetts voters will have an opportunity to impose limits on taxes.

Yet, in spite of everyone's reluctance to pay higher taxes, especially when the amount of money all levels of government take from our pockets increases with each passing year, warning flags fly whenever Proposition 2½ is discussed.

If passed, we're assured, important services the public now enjoys will, of necessity, be curtailed. Threats to eliminate services give everyone pause; people hate paying taxes but also hate to think of giving up those wonderful service programs.

Elimination of some services could affect all of us just as taxation does. The question of which services might go unfunded, however, has yet to be addressed.

Among state programs we have paid for in the past and are probably still paying for are mileage markers on all

state highways. Several years ago we noticed every mile of state road acquired ten metal posts marking each one-tenth of a mile. In intervening years most of these mileage markers have disappeared. Some posts have been knocked down. Some have been removed. Some still stand but are missing their little tag indicators.

The mileage posts and markers costs Massachusetts taxpayers over \$300,000, served no useful purpose and virtually nobody cares that they're gone. The money spent was totally wasted. Those few markers still clinging to their posts, and those few posts still in place, are now so few and far between, no one pays them the slightest attention. Furthermore, every vehicle on the highway is equipped with an odometer to measure mileage.

The idea behind mileage markers was an attempt to pinpoint dangerous portions of highways; accident reports, it was believed, would include precise location, within a tenth of a mile, and help the state highway department determine where accidents occurred most frequently.

It might have been less expensive and just as useful if mileages had been painted on the edges of the roads. While the paint would wear, in time, at least it couldn't have been stolen or knocked over, and the visual pollution of hundreds of thousands of posts could have been avoided.

Other state services may be more controversial. One program, for example, is offered by the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities to provide funds for non-profit organizations, including towns, historical societies and museums, planning work on paintings, drawings, prints, documents, decorative arts, manuscripts and rare books.

This program assuredly serves a portion of the state's residents, but all taxpayers are forced to contribute a share whether they participate or not in the benefits. For instance, the Newton Arts Center qualified for \$500 to hire an acoustics specialist to design a solution to echoing musical notes being played in the arts center's building.

The Berkshire Museum in Pittsfield, another grant recipient, used the funds to make physical changes in its building. A technical expert, paid by the state, gave assistance. The Forbes Library's collection of World War I posters has been restored with matching funds granted by the Council on the Arts and Humanities.

While grants to local programs are limited to \$1,000 per application, awards are granted three times each year. The arts community in Provincetown, Wellfleet and Truro received a \$1,000 award a year ago, matched it with their own funds, and held a Fall Arts Festival which has now become an annual event.

Admission to 30 galleries (all, presumably, business enterprises) and 50 artists' studios, as well as to performances in music and dance, readings and discussions, are offered the public during the Festival, at a \$5 per person fee.

Opera New England, one of 221 cultural groups across the state to receive awards totalling \$2.4 million, accepted \$15,000 toward new productions; the opera company combines the resources of eight New England communities which share costs of production to enjoy grand opera.

Opera New England pays \$25,000 toward production costs annually; this is supplemented by the state awards. In return, two different adult operas and four performances for children in the schools are offered on Cape Cod.

"Council funding," according to Anne Hawley, executive director of the state agency, "has a significant ripple effect on the communities. Helping provide opera in Massachusetts communities means 100,000 people can enjoy them without driving to Boston or New York."

Unquestionably what she says is true. The question is, though, should you be forced to pay for that? Should not, instead, such cultural activities be funded entirely by those people who benefit from them, those who participate, rather than by every taxpayer in the Commonwealth?

Nobody's against music, art, history, opera, rare books, paintings, prints, and preservation of manuscripts or World War I posters.

Is it, though, a proper function of government to tax you to support the arts and humanities? Would Proposition 2½, if passed, mean the destruction of arts and humanities programs in Massachusetts? Or would it mean only that those who want to support such programs do so with their own money, not with yours?

These are but a few examples of state services that might be curtailed if Proposition 2½ gets enough "Yes" votes on November 4th. There are doubtless hundreds, if not thousands, of other programs sponsored by the state with your money. Some may be your pet projects. Some may be pet projects of other taxpayers. But we all pay for them all.

Proposition 2½ has much to recommend it; one particularly attractive aspect is the reduction of auto excise taxes from \$66 to \$25 per \$1,000 valuation. With new car prices at their present levels, the excise tax is becoming a large factor in every family's budget.

Another, the abolishment of fiscal autonomy of school committees is long over-due; and a related item, prohibition of mandated state programs to cities and towns that reject those programs, would return control over local costs to municipalities.

An often-overlooked, but fiscally-important aspect of state-funded programs, are administrative expenses. Each project, program, council, agency, department, division of what-have-you, requires a salaried staff. An administrator, an assistant, and one or more clerical employees are the barest minimum. In addition, technical assistance experts often draw good salaries, too. Each requires office space, furnishings, and separate budgets for supplies, maintenance, transportation, telephone, and other expenses.

Eliminating a few such services (and their personnel) could go a long way toward making up any short-fall Proposition 2½ would impose on services that benefit each and every taxpayer, rather than only a small percentage of our population.

With savings realized from the tax cap, individuals may choose to support projects in which they are personally involved; those not involved might use their tax savings to help pay heating bills each winter.