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Reed: Budgets 101

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BY INGRID REED
THE RECORD

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I DOUBT that there will be more than a few gatherings around the pool and or by the grill this weekend where friends and neighbors will be speculating if we really will have a state budget in place by this Wednesday's deadline.

But I would be willing to bet that if a discussion about New Jersey spending and taxes takes place in backyards, there would be informed and energized opinions about the finances of the state and of their town.

There also would be lots of advice, probably in raised voices, about what should happen next to straighten out property taxes, public-sector employee pay, health care contributions, teachers salaries, state debt, tolls, municipal aid, school aid, rebates, size of police forces, caps, income taxes – and more.

As we approach the end of June, the focus is as always

on getting a budget through the Legislature that the governor is willing to sign.

But this year we should praise the public for paying attention and getting involved in the big budget discussions that have been roiling through New Jersey for the last six months.

For the first time in a long time, whether Republican or Democrat, citizens know a lot about the financial challenges before the state and what has to be done to deal with them.

We understand only too well that the state does not have enough incoming revenue to support its expenses and that a big part of those expenses is the aid due our municipalities and school districts for property-tax relief.



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We made the connection between our property taxes and this aid. We also became well-informed about the costs of the services we receive from local government and our school districts.

Debates began to arise about the relative value and cost of police and teachers. Voters were paying attention to what the choices their representatives were making to solve public problems.

Hooray for citizens paying attention. Hooray for the governor and his party in the Legislature and for Democrats in the majority in the Legislature. They did what organized parties are supposed to do: clearly state their values and explain how they are carried out in the policies they advocate.

Hooray for all the organized groups, for the letter writers, the demonstrators and the lobbyists who made sure many different perspectives were out there influencing decisions. Hooray for the media – both reporters and editors who informed and analyzed what was said and done at the state and local level about achieving balanced budgets.

But there is no resting. An equally tough budget process awaits us in the new fiscal year. Revenue projections have not gone up, and we still have big pension investments to be made.

Even though we know that we have another equally daunting budget year ahead of us, we should take six months off from paying attention to the budgets and focus on other matters such as races for the House of Representatives in our 13 congressional districts.

But during this time we can also call on the Legislature and the governor to pay attention to several problems that need attention and would interest the newly aware and involved public.

Here are three:

1) Examine counties.

Learn about their budgets, their management capacity, who they employ and for what purposes. They are the third piece in the property-tax bill together with municipal government and school districts. We know very little about them.

Counties are often a regional alternative for taking over municipal responsibilities or to provide services on a less expensive regional basis. But are they? Do costs vary for the same services from county to county? Are they understaffed, overstaffed or appropriately staffed?

I doubt we know and we should.

They need to be as closely viewed as are our towns and schools.

Pay attention to details in the county executive race in Bergen County this fall for clues to what running a county is all about.

2) Limit when elections can take place.

My guess is that there are more voters involved in solving local government budgets all around the state than those who showed up to vote in fire district elections, school board elections, in May municipal elections and then runoffs in June.

This does not include all the special elections for school bond issues.

The confusion and profusion of elections is not fair to voters and very expensive. The impediments to grouping all elections can be met if they are addressed seriously.

A final challenge with elections is to eliminate run-off elections by having voters rank their choices, known as instant runoff voting, which is working well as a reform in several large cities.



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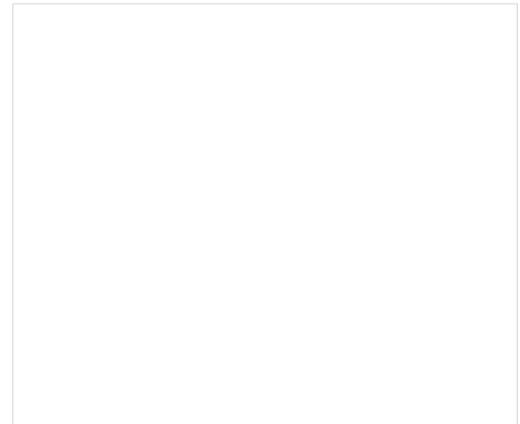
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3) Increase visibility of candidates for the Legislature.

Voters should know their legislators – the people who shared the responsibility for creating the state budget with the governor.

In the 2011 election, all 120 seats will be up for election (80 in the Assembly and 40 in the Senate) from districts newly configured after redistricting takes place.

From studies we have done at Eagleton, we know that legislative races receive scant coverage – one or two stories in an election season unless it is a highly competitive district.

Candidates rarely debate. Candidates don't provide information about campaign contacts. At the very least, consideration should be given to requiring candidates for the legislature to provide contact information for their campaign office in the same way that they are required to provide contact information for their treasurers.

Without public funding similar to the gubernatorial races, it may not be possible to require legislative candidates to debate, but what a favorable impression they would make on the public if they would promise voluntarily to do so. There will be much to debate.

These three issues could be dealt before restarting the budget discussion in January 2011, when the Legislature convenes.

It is to be hoped that a year from now we can say that even though we probably won't agree on all aspects of the budget – as the Legislature must – New Jerseyans were involved and concerned throughout the process.

For now, raise a beer or an iced tea to the tough, new 2011 budget – either because you like it or you are simply glad it is done.

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