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Rollback problems



PROGRESSIVE VIEWS

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It has been clear, especially over the last several months, that the deck is stacked against cities and counties when it comes to regulating local issues such as property tax assessments and development.

The Texas Legislature has spent years crafting laws that make it harder for local residents to have a say through their elected representatives to city councils and county commissioners courts on what kind of protections and regulations they want to see.

From concrete batching plants to water control districts, residents have learned the hard lesson that the representatives we have been electing to the Texas House (Kyle Biedermann) and Texas Senate (Donna Campbell) are more interested in voting for the interests of real estate developers and other donors, rather than for the interests of their constituents.

Now, the Texas Legislature is at it again with Senate Bill 2 (SB2), the "property tax rollback" bill. This legislation would require voter-approval for any property tax increase over 2.5 percent for cities, counties, and school districts (the current cap is 8 percent). It would severely impact the ability of our cities, counties and school boards to make needed budget decisions at the local level. It's a *very* aggressive rollback.

Supporters of this bill say that city and county officials can simply "make their case to the voters" for a higher-than-2.5 percent increase before an election. But wait — they are *not allowed* to do so. The Texas Election Code prevents cities from using any city resources to argue for or against a ballot proposal. So should city officials "make their case" by asking voters to approve a larger property tax increase, those officials could go to jail. Nice, huh?

On Feb. 6, the Texas Senate Committee on Property Tax held a hearing on SB2 in which they treated the witnesses

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testifying against the bill with the utmost contempt. According to the Texas Municipal League (an advocacy group for cities), "the chair stated more than once that he wouldn't listen to suggestions from those opposed to the bill."

According to the *Houston Chronicle*, groups and witnesses supporting the bill "were given seven minutes" to speak "and were rarely interrupted." Opponents, however, received only two minutes and were frequently interrupted.

This bill would hinder the ability of cities and counties to pay for public safety and other services that constituents request. The Center for Public Policy Priorities stated, "the bill doesn't explain how the state would replace billions of dollars school districts would lose."

At the Feb. 11 meeting, County Commissioner Richard Chapman expressed his concern, even before the bill is out of committee, about county funding should the bill get signed into law (which he believes it will).

If the Texas Legislature would step up to its responsibility to adequately fund public schools, people wouldn't be screaming for "property tax reform." With inadequate funding from the state, school districts have no choice but to raise property taxes to make sure local schools have enough funding to operate.

Texas is experiencing rapid population growth, and with it, increases in property taxes as more demand for land and property increases their value. According to an article by Rich Sena (a Boerne ISD Trustee and columnist in the *Star*), "The state has reduced its contribution to public K-12 funding."

In 2006, the state and local property taxes contributed equally to public schools (45 percent each, according to Sena). But, he says, "As of 2018, property taxes contributed 52 percent and the state 38 percent." To many (this columnist included), this statistic shows a diabolical and years-long assault on public education by our Republican state leaders.

Others have proposed expanding the scope of goods and services subject to the sales tax. But a sales tax unduly burdens the poor and those on fixed incomes, because it takes a larger percentage of income from low-income taxpayers than from those with high incomes.

I urge voters to call Sen. Campbell (512-463-0125) and express opposition to SB2. A similar bill in the House has not yet made it to the Ways and Means Committee.

We can't allow our local officials to be further hamstrung in providing needed services. Our officials need the ability to make these decisions locally, not in Austin. Once again, Sen. Campbell appears poised to approve a measure acting against local interests. When she is up for re-election, I urge you to remember her actions and vote her out.

Laura Bray is the deputy chairman of the Kendall County Democratic Party.