

THE OPINION PAGE

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OUR OPINION

Income tax relief? It's a bad idea

Herald editorial board

Certain Republicans in the North Dakota House likely will be popular with the state's voters – at least those voters who aren't deeply thinking about how a modest state income tax is a necessity in a commodity-based economy.

Last week, a state House panel added an amendment to the state budget bill that could eventually kill North Dakota's annual income tax and replace it with dollars from the growing Legacy Fund. This is a proposal widely discussed in North Dakota, but one that was soundly defeated, 41-4, last month by wise members of the Senate.

The proposal would divert half of the Legacy Fund's earnings each two-year cycle into an "income tax rate reduction fund." After a few years, proponents believe the tax rate would be so small that lawmakers could repeal income taxes altogether.

It's not a good move, and our hope is that this proposal – and any like it that would simply hand out Legacy Fund dollars to the general public – is squashed before making any headway whatsoever.

The Legacy Fund was created via statewide vote in 2010 that mandated 30 percent of oil and gas tax revenue be stashed away in a state savings account. Today, the balance nears \$6 billion; also today, many residents and lawmakers have ideas for using those dollars.

One popular idea is to follow the Alaska method. In that state, all residents receive an annual check, paid from oil tax revenues.

We subscribe to the philosophy of Gov. Doug Burgum, who urges Legacy Fund dollars be doled only to projects that have regional, state or national impact; that the dollars be multiplied through partnerships or matching funds; that Legacy projects diversify the economy and attract workforce; and that projects have lasting impacts beyond our current generation.

Using these criteria, we don't see tax relief as a legitimate use of Legacy dollars. Proponents of the income-tax proposal say it would help attract workforce, but even that isn't a certainty.

North Dakota's income tax is 1.10 percent on taxable income less than \$37,950 for a single filer and \$63,400 for a joint filer.

It's a low, low tax rate – proven by North Dakota's presence on various lists for tax-friendly states. If that low tax rate won't help North Dakota attract more workers, we're not sure even zero income tax would move the needle in the appropriate direction.

And then there's North Dakota's economy – heavily reliant on oil and agriculture. In boom years, the economy thrives; in down years, the economy suffers. Those down years will be exacerbated if the income tax goes away.

Really, North Dakotans have learned this lesson already, since the income tax has been reduced in the past and some lawmakers have openly said it was a mistake as commodity prices roller-coaster upward and downward.

Using Legacy Fund dollars for income-tax relief would be a popular political move for lawmakers. Residents would love the extra dollars in their pockets.

Yet it would be a great mistake.

VIEWPOINT

United to fight poverty in area

By Phyllis Johnson
My parents would probably never have admitted we were poor when I was a kid, although we had a family of six crammed into a tiny two-bedroom house. We always had enough to eat, but it involved oceans of macaroni and not much hamburger in the hotdish. Nearly all of our clothes were hand-me-downs from cousins and friends.



Johnson

One year, someone gave my mom an entire bolt of hideous, scratchy flannel, and she used it sew winter pajamas for all of us kids. I remember worrying that my younger sister might die when she was feverish and dehydrated from the flu, and although the doctor recommended she go to the hospital, we couldn't afford it. My mom sat by her for hours giving her ginger ale by the teaspoon until she recovered.

I feel fortunate that my children and grandchildren haven't had those experiences. Maybe that's why I said yes when I was asked to be the United Way campaign chair

seven years ago, and then to continue serving on the board.

In 2015, the United Way of Grand Forks, East Grand Forks and Area decided to narrow its focus and to concentrate on projects that address poverty in our community. I think addressing poverty in our community is vital, not just for those who need a hand up, but for those of us who (at least for the moment) are more fortunate.

In strategic planning sessions last year, the United Way board decided we needed to work more broadly in the community to fight poverty. We have learned from organizations that receive United Way funding that many of them don't fully understand the scope of the work of others. We know there are overlapping programs to address poverty across organizations, and we suspect there are gaps in services, too.

That's why I'm excited that United Way is convening a Poverty Summit on April 25 at Calvary Lutheran Church. In addition to organizations funded by the United Way, we have invited to the table members of local faith communities, service clubs, school systems, Altru and

other parts of the health system, law enforcement, and others who work with people in poverty.

The Poverty Summit will be an opportunity for us all to learn from one another, identify gaps, and look for opportunities to collaborate. Following the Poverty Summit, we will convene focus groups with people who are living in poverty to gain their perspective about needed services. We will reconvene the larger group in late summer to identify next steps for collaborative and effective efforts to address poverty in our community.

Unfortunately, it is frighteningly easy to find oneself or one's family in poverty. More than 46 percent of single moms in Grand Forks live in poverty. Or maybe mom gets seriously ill and her husband has to spend days or weeks at Mayo with her when neither has a job that provides enough paid leave to cover their time away from work. The children still need to be cared for and they don't stop growing out of shoes and clothes. The rent or mortgage still needs to be paid. This kind of financial catastrophe could happen to far too many of us.

Helping people in poverty is the right thing to do for the overall health of our community. In addition to benefits to the local economy, relief from the stressors associated with living in poverty allow individuals to contribute to the social, cultural, and spiritual vitality of our community in ways not possible when they are focused on money for their next meal, life-saving medications, or rent payment.

The upcoming Poverty Summit is one of several ways that the United Way seeks to make our community a better place to live by lending a hand to those in need. You may support United Way through payroll deductions, automatic debit to your bank account, or with a one-time donation.

However you do it, please know that by contributing to the United Way, you are an important part of a community effort to address the needs of people who otherwise might not have a warm safe place to live, enough to eat, or the ability to pay for medication and to make our community a better place to live for all of us. Thank you.

Phyllis E. Johnson is interim president/CEO of United Way of Grand Forks, East Grand Forks, and Area.

IN THE MAIL

Parking ramp could be in future phase

To the editor,
On behalf of Altru Health System, I wanted to take the opportunity to thank Jon Falch for his recent letter (March 23: "Why Not Build A Parking Garage?") and to give insight into our process and journey as we move forward with a bold new era of care that includes a new hospital in 2022.

Over the past year, we have been focused on engaging the communities throughout this region. Hopefully, you've noticed that we've been holding community conversations in several different venues. We've enjoyed these opportunities, we've learned a lot, and we're committed to continuing them. A large part of these conversations oftentimes involves not just our plans for the new hospital, but also our plans for the entire campus and all of Altru's facilities in Grand Forks and the region, including plans for parking.

Before beginning the design process for the new hospital, we went through a robust master planning process that mapped out the future of our health system facilities, including examining the costs and feasibility of a parking structure. In looking closely at our budget and our programming and facility needs, we determined the time wasn't right to spend money on a structured parking

facility. The cost per stall for a parking ramp is roughly 10 times the cost per stall of surface parking. To be good financial stewards, we determined the dollars we would need to spend on a parking structure would be better used for things that could provide the people of this region world-class care.

Although phase one of our building project does not include a parking structure, we hope to include it in a future phase. Additionally, we are focused on continually improving the parking experience at Altru, and although there will be challenges during the construction process, the result will be an accessible and convenient parking program for visitors and our staff.

We're excited about the future of this region, and we're excited to be building a new facility which will make the community proud. We hope you will continue to engage in conversations with us about our future, and we're always open to learning from you. Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have any further suggestions or questions. You can send us a message or comment directly at altru.org/future.

**Brad Wehe, CEO
Altru Health System**

Facebook rules? Let Congress do job

To the editor,
A recent Washington Post editorial in the Herald, titled "Rules would hurt everyone



CARTOON

but Facebook," exposes weakness in the continuing attacks against Facebook and other platforms that serve as means for expression of opinions.

Facebook, and others, say they are not responsible for what may be posted by millions of users. That position is, and has been, under heavy and sustained criticism. Many want to impose responsibility upon those platforms, especially Facebook, for what is posted.

Mr. Zuckerberg is now saying, in substance, "OK, if we are going to be held responsible for what members post, tell us the rules." All smart businesses seek to avoid liability by following rules; to do that they must first know what those rules are. This is reasonable.

But it doesn't seem reasonable to the Wash-

ington Post, which slams Zuckerberg's request for rules and instead just wants Facebook to "use judgment and accept responsibility." This is saying to Facebook, and others, "you do what you think is right, and we will decide later whether it was." This position is surprising, as it comes after manifold and bitter complaints that self-regulation of online platforms doesn't work.

So, while the Washington Post doesn't want the government to issue rules to govern Facebook, you can be sure it will expect the government to decide in any given instance whether Facebook was right or wrong.

To correct wrongs and advance justice, governments at all levels promulgate rules in the form of statutes and regulations. In the United States these rules are

made public so we know what is not allowed. That's only fair.

If anyone doubts that the governments have problems issuing rules they should glance at numberless volumes of statutes, regulations and administrative rules produced by federal, state, and local lawmakers.

We elect members of Congress to handle just such matters. If Facebook and others are to be reined in, and in fact that is what Mr. Zuckerberg is requesting, lawmakers should do it.

Finally, the editorial does not list or describe who will be hurt, and how they will be hurt, by such rules. The editorial does, however, clearly show how envious some of the print media is of the financial success of Facebook and Google.

**John D. Sens
Newfolden, Minn.**

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— GEORGE WINSHIP, Herald founder

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