

The record surplus

The wrangling began within hours of the announcement of a projected \$7.7 billion Minnesota budget surplus.

To be fair, most lawmakers and interest groups offering suggestions have the state's best interests in mind. However, some ideas represent far ends of the political spectrum. Based on this state's history — particularly in recent years — that should come as no surprise.

At the same time, we also saw a few solid pieces of advice, including comments by Sen. Bill Weber of Luverne that appear at the bottom of this page.

As always, we hope Minnesota lawmakers will sift through the debris and find middle ground. The alternative is that lawmakers cling so firmly to the far right or far left principles they accomplish only two things:

- A colossal waste of time and money while lawmakers battle through self-imposed gridlock.
- They drive the partisan wedge even deeper, which is not helpful.

In some ways, news that Minnesota may be on the doorstep of a record \$7.77 billion surplus makes our lawmakers' jobs that much tougher. Lobbyists already have their hands out. The list of potential projects will be endless.

Both Rep. Rod Hamilton of Mt. Lake and Sen. Bill Weber of Luverne have the experience and connections to be difference-makers in this process. The challenge for both is finding a balance between "good" and "ideal" decisions, recognizing in today's increasingly partisan world, perfect legislation is nearly impossible.

Within the endless stream of opinions we've seen in recent days, two comments stick out:

- Doug Loon, president and CEO

NEWS & NOTES

■ Last week, Minnesotans received word of a projected \$7.77 billion budget surplus.

■ To no one's surprise countless lawmakers and special interest groups offered suggestions on how to spend the money.

■ The challenge for Minnesota lawmakers will be to work together to truly make the most of this opportunity.

of the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce: *"With historic and recurring budget surpluses and the state budget set at 12% growth, it's time for policymakers to take a serious look at Minnesota's tax and spending patterns."*

• Pat Baustian, Luverne mayor and president of the Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities: *"The budget surplus, coupled with the anticipated influx of federal funds, means state leaders have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to make investments that will have a lasting impact on improving our communities."*

We know the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce pushes the "limit taxes" narrative every year. That said, we agree this is the perfect time to make our state more competitive from a tax standpoint.

Meanwhile, it is no surprise to see the CGMC pushing the "invest in communities" message. However, we also know that healthy communities generally keep our state healthy. So it makes sense to invest in communities — particularly in areas of infrastructure.

Lawmakers can make 2022 a turning point for our state — if they don't let politics get in the way.

— Rahn Larson

OUR READERS RESPOND

What is your favorite Christmas song and who sings it?

Sarah Ucin
■ WINDOM



"Mariah Carey singing 'All I Want for Christmas is You.' That's my favorite Christmas song ever — timeless music!"

Peter Wasienski
■ JACKSON



"I like 'Rusty Old Chevrolet' by Da Yoopers. I like it because we had a Christmas parade in Jackson and we put a '51 Chevy on the tow truck and played that song with it."

Brenda Fellersen
■ FAIRMONT



"'Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree' by Brenda Lee. I like the song because I was named after her."

Betsy Herding
■ WINDOM



"I like classic Christmas music — anything by Bing Crosby, especially 'White Christmas.'"

Lovin' those Christmas songs

I've clipped my column each week and stored them in the bottom of my desk drawer ever since I started back at the Citizen in June 1999.

What will I do with them? I have no idea. I may even toss them when I retire. But I hold on to them for weeks just like this one. I was thinking of writing a column on Christmas songs, but thought, "Well, I wrote a similar column just a year or two ago at Christmas time, so I can't write that again."

Well, lo and behold, (longtime Citizen readers may remember that phrase from former editor Al Sykora), in the last 10 years I had not penned a column about holiday songs. Now, I may have done it more than 10 years ago — I didn't go back farther than a decade — but if you haven't read a Christmas carols column of mine in 10 years, it's worth reprising — if, like me, you can ever remember reading one.

Why, you no doubt ask, do I bring up Christmas carols?

Well, for starters, you'll notice that's our question of the week this week (see above) and further, I'm listening to Christmas songs every time I hop in the pickup. Set to KXAC out of St. James (100.5), I hear classic Christmas all the time. I love it.

I think I fell in love with Christmas carols/songs as a kid. My mom was quite the holiday decorator when it came to Christmas and as she was decorating, or after everything was decorated, she got out the phonograph — yes, phonograph — and put on Christmas records, yes, the vinyl ones. The experience just made you feel good inside.

Our record player was one of those two-tone box jobs. The top flipped open and the phonograph

was inside with the speaker built-in in front.

My favorite album was "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer." It had a bunch of the classics.

So, what are my favorite Christmas carols/songs?

Well, I heard a few of them on KXAC just this week.

David Bowie and Bing Crosby teamed

up in 1977 to record one that has really grown on me over the years, "Peace on Earth/Little Drummer Boy." They sing "Little Drummer Boy" together, then Bowie sings "Peace on Earth" while Bing sings "Little Dummer Boy" underneath. It is beautiful.

Another of my favorites is Andy Williams' version of "The Most Wonderful Time of the Year." His voice was tailor-made for the song.

One of my favorite Christmas albums (and one my wife despises because of that "screechin' pig") is John Denver and the Muppets. There are some great songs on that album, none better than "The 12 Days of Christmas." John starts it out with "partridge in a pear tree" and then a different muppet sings a different day with Miss Piggy, of course, dramatically singing "Fiiiiive Gooooold Riings."

Then as the song reaches the ninth through 12th days of Christmas, Piggy adds after her "five gold rings," "ba-dum-bum-bum." It's great.

And they also sing "We Wish You a Merry Christmas."

All the Muppets chime in on this one, but what makes it comical is the line, "Now bring us some figgy pudding." Piggy thinks they're singing "piggy pudding," to which Gonzo explains, "No, 'figgy pudding,' it's made with figs . . ."

"Oh," says Piggy. ". . . and bacon!" Gonzo adds. Gotta love the Muppets' humor!



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Residents, businesses step up

As I pen this December piece, there is a hefty blanket of Christmas snow on our front lawn — but my heart is warm.

On this season of giving, friends and neighbors are writing checks to the Windom Area Foundation, a local non-profit entity that is all about helping the communities of Windom, Bingham Lake and Fish Lake.



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The Foundation assists local efforts by using interest from its endowment, plus other donations. It also hosts special project funds, such as the Veterans Memorial project. All gifts are tax deductible, by the way.

Our Foundation board includes: Ryan McNamara, chairman; Tony Scott, vice-chair; Justin Schmit, treasurer; Dave Fischelich; Anne Foley; Mary Klosterbuer; Mike Nesseth; Peggy Pfeffer and myself (secretary). We've seen, firsthand, the impact of the Foundation's efforts.

The Foundation is just a year

old and we cautiously protect the endowment for the long haul. Nonetheless, we have been able to provide two \$5,000 gifts — to the Lions Club shelter project and the Veterans Memorial.

However, the size of grants aren't all that matters. We've seen the smiling faces of students who benefit from

something as small as a \$500 jump rope donation that helps kids get a healthy start to their school day by jumping rope.

Our fall fund drive received a giant boost from Bank Midwest's \$100,000 matching grant which offers \$1 for every \$3 donated. Reaching our goal felt like a long shot two weeks ago, but we're up to 51%. And though the match runs out Jan. 1, residents say as they gain optimism as they watch these ads for new names.

You'll find a list of donors in our page 16 ad. Look for updates to that list in Saturday's Shopper.

The surplus, overcollection of taxes and a plan to help

On Jan. 31, 2022, the Minnesota Legislature will go into session again.

Last week, the Minnesota Management and Budget released the November budget forecast showing a record-setting \$7.7 billion projected surplus for the 2022-2023 biennium. It also doesn't factor in the more than \$1 billion in COVID relief dollars Minnesota has remaining.

While the announcement is excellent news for the state's financial picture, it also clearly demonstrates that our government is taking far too much money from taxpayers.

At the same time government is flush with cash, Minnesotans have been getting hammered at home.

Minnesota families and small businesses continue to struggle to survive. Households face unprecedented inflation, gas prices up over 50% and home energy costs that are spiraling out of control. This is among other adverse effects that have arisen since COVID.

These issues must be remedied in the upcoming session.

A hazardous approach

Unfortunately, this administration and other lawmakers are already heralding this surplus as

an opportunity to spend even though much of this is one-time money.

This hazardous approach would only lead us down a path to create more unsustainable permanent spending obligations. Furthermore, it fails to recognize existing government bloat and would ease any pressure on this administration and its officials to curb wasteful government spending and cull failing programs that we all know clearly exist.

Giving back

Suffice to say, our government can and should do more with the dollars it already has.

We should prioritize giving this back to families and small businesses by providing tax relief and ensuring they have the necessary resources to succeed.

Some of the initial ideas include direct relief to taxpayers, cuts to sales and income taxes and efforts to reduce or eliminate Minnesota's current tax on Social Security. Other issues are also emerging.

Nursing homes are seeing a severe downturn in their cash reserves due to increased costs, lost staff due to vaccine mandates and a decline in their census, leading to a loss of money from operations. Since there already are some homes closing, this issue demands immediate attention from the state.

Unemployment

We also have issues with the Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund.

Later this month, Minnesota businesses are expected to be hit with a 15% or higher hike to address the \$1 billion deficit the fund currently has. We must take action to avoid this harmful tax increase on businesses that are already struggling to keep doors open with inflation and supply chain challenges.

Infrastructure projects

Another potential target is using these dollars for critical infrastructure projects. This should be a bipartisan goal.

With much of the surplus money



BILL WEBER
GUEST COLUMNIST

QUICK HIT

Joel Alvstad
Sports Editor



Demeaning dash

Last weekend, we saw a perfect example of how devalued education is in society.

The Sioux Falls Stampede held what it called "Dash for Cash" where 10 teachers were placed on a rug that was covered with \$5,000 in dollar bills. The teachers had a certain amount of time to grab as much cash as they could, which they could use on supplies for their students — supplies school districts should provide, not teachers.

To their credit, the Stampede released a statement acknowledging the event was poorly conceived on their part. They and their corporate sponsors have increased their donations to all the teachers involved, as well as applicants who weren't picked.

The point is this. Schools should be properly funded and teachers shouldn't have to be subjected to reality-show stunts to try to help kids. And whoever thought that was a good idea should be fired.

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YOUR VOICE COUNTS

We welcome letters to the editor of up to 300 words on any topic. We strongly encourage letters to be typed/emailed and may be edited for clarity and length and must include your name, address and daytime phone number. The deadline for letters is noon on Mondays.

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