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Too little or too much?

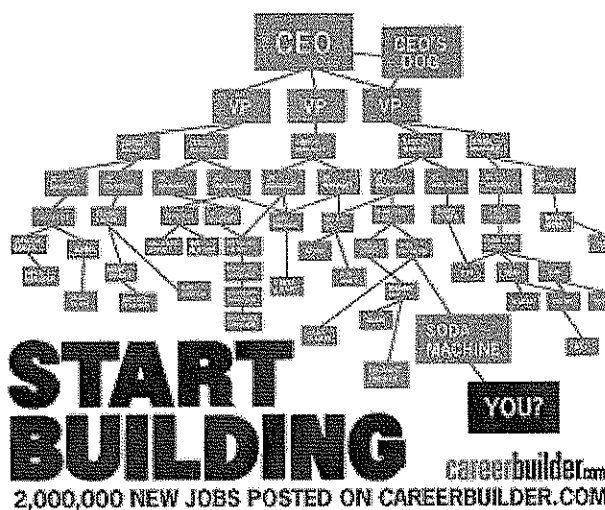
State can avoid cuts by educating the public about vital services

By Roy T. Meyers

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This summer, Gov. Martin O'Malley asked the public for suggestions about how to make budget cuts during this time of austerity. Citizens responded with thousands of suggestions, for which they deserve praise.

But many of these suggestions also showed little understanding of how citizens can benefit from robust and efficient government services. Maryland needs to better inform its citizens about the many benefits its government provides.



Even after the economy improves, Maryland will still face large budget deficits. They can be eliminated only by more spending cuts and/or tax increases. Gaining the public's acceptance for either of these will be difficult. Tax increases, in particular, are a hard sell these days because many citizens seem to assume that the state is a profligate spender.

But this is not the case. If citizens knew more about the state's activities and responsibilities, many would conclude that numerous state programs are underfunded, rather than overfunded. Here are three examples:

1. Chesapeake Bay: It's a very long way from being "saved." Doing so will require much larger investments to reduce nutrients and protect sensitive land.
2. Transportation: Projected funding is insufficient to prevent increases in congestion, particularly by making much-needed, significant improvements to mass transit.
3. Social services: The state does not spend enough to help vulnerable people. With more funding for mental health programs, some of the uninsured mentally ill who now disrupt communities would no

longer do so. With more qualified child welfare caseworkers and foster care parents, there would be fewer tragedies of abuse and neglect.

Of course, more spending for these and other investments requires that we spend the money efficiently. In fact, many aspects of Maryland's budget and management processes, including the governor's well-regarded StateStat program, do protect against waste. But many citizens don't understand that. They also lack an understanding of how selected spending increases in priority areas could benefit them over the long run.

To reduce this problem, Maryland should create a Web site that clearly describes the most important conditions in the state and what the state government is doing to improve those conditions. The legislature's Office of Policy Analysis just made a start on this with its Web page, "Measuring Maryland's Progress." There you can see, for example, that only 10 states have worse infant mortality rates than does Maryland. The governor's Web page also describes his priorities and accomplishments.

But these sites are no match for our neighboring state's "Virginia Performs" scorecard. It shows, for example, Virginia's rates and trends for business startups, prisoner recidivism, infant mortality and educational attainment, among other concerns. If Maryland citizens were better informed about these and other concerns, then they would have a better basis for suggesting budgetary priorities for the state.

Maryland does provide some information about how its programs are performing, but in formats that are far from user-friendly. While the budget includes much performance data, they are very difficult to understand and often not clearly connected to state priorities. Similarly, the voluminous data on the StateStat Web site lacks analysis that explains basic performance trends to the average citizen. Converting these documents to a format that citizens can readily access could help convince them to accept higher taxes to address critical problems. It would also help them better identify spending that is not working and which could be eliminated.

Finally, the state needs a better process for considering tax legislation. Like the federal tax code, the state code is cluttered with special exceptions. But the state does not subject these to the scrutiny given to spending programs. For example, a biennially required report on tax breaks is not even available on the Web. Eliminating some of these preferences would produce "base-broadening" savings, reducing the need to raise tax rates.

The best approach to reforming the state's tax code would be to appoint a tax reform commission. It could engage the public in a discussion of how to generate sufficient revenues through a fairer and more efficient tax system.

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