



Discussion Topic

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WHAT CAN GOVERNMENT DO FOR (TO) YOU?

If you ask a farmer and an urbanite identical questions about the role of government, the answers probably won't even come close to meshing. But no matter how far apart the differences may be, in times of economic train wrecks like these, it's clear the status quo isn't cutting it.

Credible projections warn that after federal stimulus money has been spent, Michigan will find itself in an even bigger financial hole that will almost certainly collapse on itself unless something is done to shore up the sides. To get a better look down the hole, Michigan Farm Bureau set up a Government Streamlining Task Force last August to try to get ahead of the problem before agriculture gets run over by the urgent needs of the non-farm populace. The task force identified three major arms of state government that absorb 86 percent of Michigan's general fund money.

Corrections, education and human services might not seem like pressing agricultural issues, but when it comes time to fund those programs, agriculture might become a piggy bank to raid. "If we're one of the few industries doing well, that makes us that much more of a target," said Brigette Leach, a Climax-area farmer and head of the task force. "We could see proposals to raise property taxes, or to take away the farm sales tax exemptions or revoke Proposal A. But from those areas, property tax increases jumps out as a likely proposal."

The problem with the three most money-eating programs is that they seem to feed on each other. Children who drop out of school face a significantly higher risk of landing in the correctional system, where \$1.19 is spent for every \$1 spent on education. Also, without an education, even people who avoid prison are at higher risk of being dependent on what human services offers from programs such as welfare, food stamps and other handouts that once were considered a means to help people get out of poverty. Today the handouts, at least in some critics' eyes, have become a way of life. The solution to spending on handouts is to be sure people are employed, but the task force identified the core of the problem. "Michigan cannot continue to increase spending in the face of a declining tax base and heavily based manufacturing economy that no longer exists," it said in its report to Farm Bureau's State Policy Development Committee.

So how can the state spend its tax dollars more wisely? The task force recommended, among other things, that "Michigan review and potentially change sentencing guidelines for non-violent crimes in order to reduce prison populations and therefore reduce corrections employment;" reduce duplicative efforts among K-12 business administration; consolidation of school districts; and that "more resources should be sent to vocational, core life, practically applied coursework." Practicality, of course, seems to be the key ingredient missing, and there's where the whole mess begins. Until Michigan can retain the talent that's educated here and attract other state's talent, there will be a talent drain. But it all starts here at home.

"We need to keep kids in school first," Leach said. "We need to find other teaching techniques to keep the non-college prep students engaged. Not everyone needs college, but everyone does need skills beyond high school. We need tradesmen and craftsmen who know how to work. Right now there are too many people who are not being productive."

QUESTIONS

1. Before finding budget cuts for everyone else, ask everyone in the group "what would you be willing to give up?" Please identify a few things.
2. What state programs would your group fight to keep, even if it meant paying more taxes for it?
3. Name three things the government does now that could be done just as well or better in the private sector.