

Rodney Tom

2010 Session Review

Spring 2010

Dear Neighbors,

The Legislature recently completed a grueling 2010 session that required many difficult decisions. But I'm back home now to reconnect with the district and there's much to report.

In this newsletter I'll tell you about the Legislature's solution to the state's budget problem — and why I voted against it. I'll also address the Legislature's attempt to make our state more competitive for federal education grants. Finally, I'll highlight a major milestone that will get work started on replacing the 520 bridge.

But I wanted to start by reminding you that my job doesn't end when the Legislature leaves Olympia. Though we have a citizen Legislature comprised of members who often have careers to return to back home, many of us find that adequately responding to the various needs of constituents is a near full-time job.

Sometimes being a legislator means helping a constituent cut through red tape at a state agency. Sometimes it simply means directing them to the place where they can get the help they need. And sometimes it means addressing their concerns by re-writing state law.

But it all starts with being accessible and you should know that you can continue to reach me by calling my office or sending me an e-mail.

Without the pressures and constraints of a legislative session, the spring, summer and fall months are great times to hear from constituents and help sort out their questions and concerns. So I invite you to make use of the resource by giving us a call when the need arises. This is why I'm here.



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- Early Learning & K-12 Education
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Why I couldn't support the budget solution

Over the course of the last two sessions the Legislature has faced a budget shortfall like no other in the history of our state. In total, the multi-year shortfall totaled almost \$12 billion, a full one-third of the state general fund budget.

To their credit, legislators this year made many difficult decisions. And as vice chairman of the budget-writing Ways & Means Committee, I was heavily involved in crafting a solution.

But over time it became clear that most of my colleagues favored an approach that was heavy on new taxes and federal assistance but light on genuine government reform.

Ultimately, the Legislature closed a \$2.8 billion shortfall this year by relying on \$757 million in new taxes and about \$755 million in spending cuts, reaching again into every functional area of state government. The rest of the shortfall was covered by spending down reserves, relying on help from the federal government and shifting money from other government accounts.

Without question, there were difficult cuts made in this budget. But there was little done to permanently reshape the size and function of government.

For instance, the Legislature balked at plans to privatize our state liquor stores. We couldn't even get the state out of the printing business. These are not core functions of government. The Legislature considered merging three natural resource agencies to preserve services and save on overhead. That idea died, too. So did a plan to close the costly McNeil Island Corrections Center to shift inmates to newer, more efficient prisons.

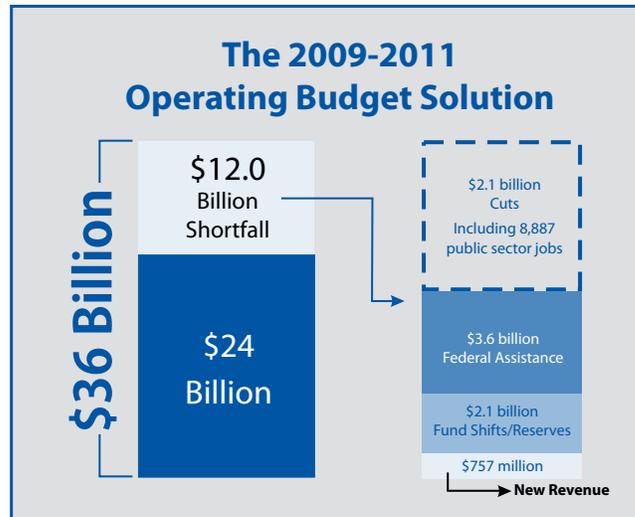
To be fair, the Legislature acted with a lot of heart this year, bending over backwards to preserve as many services as it could. But it's not enough to use your heart. You also have to use your head and plan for a sustainable future.

In the end, I just couldn't vote to raise taxes on businesses and middle class families as part of a solution that didn't adequately resize government to fit today's economic reality. In addition, this budget sets us up for another tough session next year when we'll likely face a budget shortfall near \$3 billion. Obviously we need to do more to contain costs and I believe taxpayers are growing tired of hearing about the Olympia deficit blues.

In my view, we need to quit using cuts to education and other vital services as our excuse for raising taxes when we're not willing to make structural reforms that have little impact on core government services.

After pouring my heart into helping write the budget these past two years, voting no this year was the toughest thing I've done in my eight years in the Legislature.

But I wasn't about to walk away from my firm belief that we need to eliminate non-essential functions of government and really focus on our core services until we can proudly say every service government is involved in is done in an excellent manner. Being mediocre at everything we do in government is not the kind of standard I want to perpetuate. We can't be all things to all people if we want to perform in an excellent manner. We need to slim down, eliminate the non-essentials, and focus on being great in the few core services we do deliver as a state. Mediocrity can never be tolerated, much less institutionalized. Today, far too often, we're willing to settle on "good enough" because we're stretched too thin.



Making education reform more than a slogan



Lawmakers made progress on education this year, but as is becoming an all too familiar theme, it's tentative at best. The Legislature is full steam ahead when it comes to spending and new revenue, but very cautious when it comes to reform. I believe we need to allocate more resources to education,

but only in tandem with substantive reforms inside our classrooms. More of the same will not transform our K-12 system into a world class program of education that prepares every student to compete in a global, high-tech economy.

Much attention was paid this year to making the state more competitive for federal Race to the Top education funding, which places a heavy focus on accountability measures. Only two states — Tennessee and Delaware — were awarded grants in the first round of competition. Competition in the next round is going to be fierce.

I'm worried we're not taking an aggressive enough approach to education

reform to be among the top tier states. Delaware, for example, will



remove a teacher receiving an "ineffective" rating a few years in a row, regardless of tenure. Both states use student performance data as a major component in evaluations. Here in Washington the bill signed by the governor creates a pilot project that will explore, but not require, the use of student performance data.

But at least it's movement in the right direction. Under the new bill, the bottom 5 percent among the state's persistently lowest performing schools will be required to work collaboratively with the state to develop an action plan for increasing student achievement.

Senate Bill 6696 also makes changes to the way teachers and principals are evaluated, setting new minimum performance requirements and extending the provisional status for many staffers from two years to three years.

The state's case for federal Race to the Top funding also will be bolstered by education reform legislation that was approved last year to implement a wide array of enhancements by 2018. Follow-

up legislation approved this year established current funding levels as the floor for future funding. House Bill 2776 also outlined an implementation strategy to fund these new enhanced education programs.



We've set a new course for education in our state. Now we have to hold ourselves accountable and actually fund the enhancements we've charted while continuing the concentrated push of increasing teacher effectiveness in every classroom. Every student deserves a great teacher. And I'm committed to making sure that becomes more than just a slogan.



Moving forward on replacing the 520 bridge

In a major victory for our district, the Legislature this year approved my 520 bridge replacement bill that will get work started on millions of dollars in new projects on the Eastside as part of the \$4.65 billion megaproject. And on March 30th, the governor signed my bill, Senate Bill 6392, into law.

You may remember that last year the Legislature authorized the use of tolling to help fund the replacement of the 520 bridge. But that legislation limited the use of bonds backed by toll proceeds to pay for the replacement of just the bridge structure itself.

My bill expands the use of these funds to include all projects within the 520 corridor between Redmond's Highway 202 and I-5.

That lets us get to work on building Eastside improvements to support the project while creating several thousand construction jobs. And it does so in the most favorable bidding environment in state history. Statewide, construction bids are coming in 17 percent below original engineering estimates.

That means moving forward now is going to save taxpayers a pile of money.

But most of all, after years of wrestling with this project, we're saying enough is enough. It's time to get started and move some dirt.



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