

View from the Capitol

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By State Rep. Steve Fontana

Last week, the General Assembly's Appropriations and Finance Committees passed a fair, honest, and balanced budget that is a good deal for the state and for North Haven.

North Haven residents consistently have told me that they want the state 1) to increase local education funding, 2) to improve access to quality health care, like HUSKY for kids and ConnPACE for seniors, and 3) to enhance municipal aid.

Unfortunately, Governor Rell's proposal was neither fair nor honest. Besides hiding certain costs and underfunding many items, it made many people who need help bear the brunt of spending cuts. Under her plan, thousands of working families would lose their health care, for instance, and elementary education would fall further behind.

Her budget also hurt many of these same people by shifting a greater share of the tax burden onto their shoulders. Under her plan, the state would have balanced its books on the backs of the middle class, through nickel-and-dime taxes on cigarettes and alcohol.

Our budget, however, responsibly funds vital services that our residents want. It maintains important health care programs, increases local education funding, and delivers substantial property tax relief by providing more municipal aid and boosting the property tax credit on the income tax to \$500. The budget pays for these priorities by increasing taxes on those who can best afford it – singles making more than \$265,000 per year and couples making more than \$500,000 per year. These citizens recently have received federal income tax cuts that dwarf this proposed state income tax increase.

According to one analysis, this budget significantly increases North Haven's state aid, by giving it at least an additional \$227,000 in state aid and reimbursements over last year (and at least \$193,000 more than the Governor proposed giving it). This state aid comes in three main areas: town road assistance (\$61,000), payment-in-lieu-of-taxes for new manufacturing machinery and equipment (nearly \$122,000), and education aid (\$33,000). This \$33,000 in education aid, however, is only a minimum: North Haven could receive tens of thousands of dollars more, as its share of a separate \$50 million education allocation that the Appropriations Committee set aside.

Despite what she might say, the overall difference between the Governor's proposal and ours is less than 2%. Unfortunately, rather than negotiate directly with us, the Governor has waged a rhetorical battle in the press over her refusal to consider exceeding the spending cap to enact our budget. Her rhetoric, however, belies the facts.

In the past seven years, we have exceeded the cap four times. This year, the Governor herself proposed exceeding it by roughly \$200 million. Apparently, it's OK if she wants to do it for her own reasons, but not OK for us to want to do it to address your priorities.

Admittedly, the spending cap is a legitimate and useful tool to encourage fiscal discipline, evaluate competing priorities, and make state government more efficient. If it arbitrarily prevents us from addressing your priorities, however, it serves as an obstacle to protecting our quality of life.

The voters of Connecticut charge their government with making sure, among other things, that A) their children get a good education, B) that senior citizens receive the care they need when they are sick, and C) that towns like North Haven get help paying for the services that they work hard to provide. The spending cap is a helpful tool to balance what we want with what we want to pay for, but ultimately it is just that: a tool.

Unfortunately, when I hear some legislators talk about how maintaining the state spending cap is the most important issue in Hartford, they remind me of the old adage about people who seem to know the cost of everything and the value of nothing. They slavishly cling to the idea of "controlling state spending," without considering what that spending actually is: securing, as effectively, efficiently, and responsibly as possible, the services that people want.

Connecticut is a wonderful state precisely because we, and those who came before us, regularly make significant investments in our people, businesses, and infrastructure, and subsequently maintain our commitment to those investments.

I believe that you want state government to preserve the great quality of life that we have in Connecticut, and not to sit idly by and allow it to erode gradually because we forbid ourselves from addressing your priorities and asking those who can afford it to pay a little more for them.

Our budget reflects your priorities: it increases town aid, preserves critical state services, and provides meaningful property tax relief. If you would like to see this budget approved, call Governor Rell at 1-800-406-1527 and ask her to support it.