

DETROIT FREE PRESS

Stop ... Think

Petition drive would lock state into terrible times

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It's called Stop Overspending, a campaign slogan that is laughable in a state that can barely maintain its schools, towns and roads as it is.

The petition campaign, now under way statewide, calls for constitutional changes that would basically cap state spending in its present miserable condition. Even if the economy zoomed and Michigan returned to full employment, services would not be allowed to grow at the same pace.

Colorado, which suffered through the first experiment with this type of tax limit, has put it on hold for five years. Voters opted out after facing years of school overcrowding, crumbling roads and so little money for social services and health programs that they couldn't match all the federal dollars available to them.

The Stop Overspending plan limits state budget growth to the inflation rate plus the rate of population growth, which is essentially zero here. Any excess money that comes in, even from non-tax sources such as the tobacco settlement, would be split between the state's rainy day fund and taxpayer refunds.

Michigan, mired in job losses from auto industry restructuring and other manufacturing struggles, would start in a hole.

"If a state's currently in the toilet, this is going to keep it there," said Nicholas Johnson of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a Washington, D.C., nonprofit research group that focuses on issues affecting low- and middle-income families.

The Stop Overspending group has dressed up its petition bullet points carefully. (Look on the back of the petition to see the full damage to the Constitution.) The first point, in fact, isn't even about budget rules; it calls for an end to pensions for the state lawmakers, which is merely window dressing.

The need to deflect attention from the main purpose ought to raise a huge red flag about the hidden consequences of this petition drive, which an Illinois group is coordinating in Michigan and several other states this year. The proposed budget cap sets the stage for service cuts even in times of prosperity. It's a formula that would put Michigan down for the count.

Information on the campaign is available at www.sosmichigan.com. Information from opponents can be found at www.milhs.org.