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SOS? Spell out costs of this bad idea

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One of the most devious and destructive parts of a plan called SOS, or Stop Overspending, is the way it would strangle local government. If the SOS proposal became part of the Michigan Constitution, elections would have to be held for virtually any fee increase, along with the tax elections most voters are accustomed to. Raising something as small as a \$3 recycling fee could require going to the polls.

Petition signatures are now being collected for the SOS proposal, which advertises itself primarily as a way to keep state government in check by capping new spending each year at the rate of inflation plus population growth. Deep in the fine print, and not even mentioned in the petition summary, come the local government rules. They include a requirement for voting on every special assessment or mandatory fee, no matter how small.

It's typical of the bait-and-switch tactics of this campaign. A standard line is that voters can increase spending anytime they want to. But that would mean going to the polls continuously on local issues, perhaps for items as mundane as dog license fees. To increase state spending beyond the limit in any year, two-thirds of the Legislature would have to agree to a statewide election on the issue, which would then have to pass. What are the chances of that?

This proposal would cripple government. Business and political leaders, such as those gathering on Mackinac Island this week, need to understand that it would destroy hope for projects that require strong public partnership, from mass transit and road repairs to university research. The sooner this bad idea is unmasked, the better.