

# CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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## What can we do statewide that will help locally?

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Contra Costa Times

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As the state budget crisis has worsened, Contra Costa County supervisors say they feel victimized by policies that take away property tax revenue without providing equivalent services.

Sacramento takes more than \$175 million of Contra Costa's property tax annually, about 16 percent of the county budget, with about \$70 million coming back for services, according to the county finance department.

"Local dollars should remain local," said Supervisor Gayle Uilkema. "Taxpayers buy services and the direction should be locally controlled.

"Money goes to the Legislature, and the Legislature takes 50 percent and gives us the driblets and drabs."

The supervisors agree that this practice is killing Contra Costa and other California counties and cities. In searching for answers, all of the supervisors say they agree with many of the ideas proposed by California Forward, a state government reform group sponsored by several major private foundations.

If California can get its spending in line with its

income, cities and counties will get some relief, the supervisors say.

"The light at the end of the tunnel will be an economic recovery," Supervisor Susan Bonilla said. "The other light at the end of the tunnel is government reform."

Among the changes proposed by California Forward:

Prohibiting the state from borrowing or transferring local tax dollars to its own coffers.

Evaluating state programs every 10 years to improve efficiency and root out waste.

Using windfall revenue increases to reduce deficits rather than for new spending.

Permitting a majority vote of the Legislature to pass a budget, while retaining the two-thirds majority required to raise taxes.

Bonilla and John Gioia say they are especially interested in a California Forward idea to allow local jurisdictions to seek voter approval of up to a 1 percent sales tax increase to cope with budget shortfalls. Under the proposal, a simple majority approval would be sufficient.

"We're saying that if our people want to do something about raising money, give them the freedom to do it," Bonilla said.

Supervisor Mary Piepho and Uilkema, both Republicans, balked at that idea.

Uilkema said her polls shows her constituents are

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opposed to eliminating a two-thirds vote requirement to raise taxes.

"That's not something I'm going to advocate," she said.

Piepho said she opposes tax increases and points to the success the county has had in limiting its spending.

"Tax increases are the last place I want to look," Piepho said. "We've been working really hard to rein in our spending, meanwhile there's significant government waste in Sacramento.

Supervisor Federal Glover said he was skeptical that anything will be enough to fix the state as long as Proposition 13 is in place.

"Until we get some changes in that, I don't see a lot of improvement coming," he said.

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