

# The Oregonian

STEVE DUIN

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## At long last, a warrior for tax reform

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You want tax reform? You want an end to this nickel-and-dime tinkering with a \$1 billion problem? Then you best pay attention to Ben Westlund.

Ted Kulongoski has proved you can't govern without tax reform. Ben Westlund doesn't want to try.

Tax reform isn't all we'll be talking about if Westlund, the moderate state senator from Bend running for governor as an independent, is elected in November. The former Republican considers a better health care delivery system equally important to the future of this state.

But unlike Kulongoski, who is hard pressed to discuss the problem, or Ron Saxton, who refuses to acknowledge it, Westlund is hammering away at tax reform, just as he did while serving in the Legislature.

"The most fundamental issue that needs to be discussed in this state is how revenues are raised," Westlund says. "The greatest Supreme Court justice, John Marshall, said, 'The power to tax involves the power to destroy,' and right now our current tax structure is destroying Oregon.

"We need to fundamentally and systemically reform the most volatile revenue structure in America . . . and no one will even talk about it. All anyone wants to do is nibble around the outside of the apple. It's time to stop nibbling and start making apple pie."

A few worms in the ol' tax apple popped into view last week when the Department of Revenue announced a \$205 million corporate tax rebate, a timely reminder that Oregon has a corporate kicker when the economy is sailing but no rainy-day fund when it tanks. The news sent several candidates scurrying for the microphones, especially the ones who rediscover the courage to talk about taxes only when there's money on the table.

"It's one of those issues where the solutions are not rewarded in the political marketplace," said former Rep. Mark Hass, D-Beaverton. "Any solution is not going to be an easy one; therefore, it's bad politics and the consultants say, 'Don't do it.'"

Westlund isn't listening to the consultants; neither is he interested in promoting a percentage of the state budget for education, which, Hass notes, is little more than a cynical ploy for political cover. Westlund has beaten the drum for serious tax reform for five years, ever since -- as chief budget writer in the House -- he oversaw the draconian budget cuts during the 2001 special sessions.

In 2005, a 5 percent sales tax was a major part of a 60-page proposal -- House Bill 382 -- that Westlund cosponsored with Hass, Sen. Kurt Schrader, D-Canby, and Rep. Bob Jenson, R-Pendleton.

"In the past, tax reform has been code for 'sales tax.' And sales tax is too narrow a conversation," Westlund said. "If you go out to sell Oregonians a tack-on sales tax, that goes down 90-10. That's not what I'm talking about."

Westlund is talking about cutting income taxes in half and cutting the capital-gains tax. He's talking about reduced property taxes for low-income families and seniors -- "The only people who would have their taxes raised are visitors and tax cheats," Hass argues -- and raising an additional \$1 billion for public schools and health care.

And as he talks, Democrats and Republicans alike are cheering his political suicide. Unlike Westlund, you see, they'd rather lord over a broken system than risk their candidacy on a valiant attempt to fix it.

"It's a lack of leadership. It's extreme partisanship. And it's a lack of courage to look over the horizon, when just looking down the street will get you by," Westlund said. "I don't know if it's right to run like this or wrong to run like this, but it's the right thing to do.

"Fundamental tax reform and fundamental reform in the delivery of our health care services -- that's what I stand for. Without both of them, we will continue to spiral down into mediocrity . . . and below."

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