Opinion

Legislators sing new tune

Democratic legislators are speaking out of the other sides of their mouths.

When the prospect of a general sales tax has reared its head in the past, most of the Democrats have run to hide in the nearest closet.

GAZETTE OPINION

Any sales tax, these people shouted as they scurried for cover, must be voted on by the general electorate. We have no right to impose this unpopular tax on the people, they said.

This session, local government asked the Legislature for the right to levy local option taxes, including the possibility of a sales tax. But the levies could only be made *if* the taxpayers vote to support the issue.

Most of the Democrats ran for cover again.

We can't allow people to vote on their own form of taxes, opponents of the bill suggest. That would pave the way for a general state sales tax.

Eeeek!

House Speaker Hal Harper led the retreat.

Harper suggested amending Senate Bill 115 to prevent local governments from levying a "general" sales tax. Groceries, medical supplies and services, appliances, hardware and tools should be exempt from any local levy, he said.

Harper said that restriction would ensure that tourists, not residents would pay the bill, and any seed for a statewide general sales tax — Eeeek! — would be nipped before it budded.

Rep. Royal Johnson, R-Billings, called Harper's fears pap and nonsense. The Legislature should trust local governments to govern, Johnson said.

"Let the people at the local level decide what they want to do and what they don't want to do," Johnson said.

That, of course, has been the Democratic Party line for lo these many years before the party began talking this session out of the other side of its mouth.

The fact is that local-option taxes are a pure form of democracy. When people decide that a new civic center or a tourist facility or whatever is needed, they can levy a sales tax for a limited number of years to pay for the facility. Then the sales tax, or income tax, disappears. That method of financing issues saves local taxpayers tons of money in interest. It also, as Harper notes, drops part of the burden on tourists. So local-option sales taxes save money.

Wyoming cities have used the same tax for years for special projects. Nobody likes taxes, but this tax isn't levied unless local taxpayers say they want it.

And what do Montana politicians say? Well, Montana politicians are like the state's weather. If you don't like what they're saying just wait a minute and they'll change their tune.

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