

Guest column: Drastic state budget cuts can worsen current, future prospects

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This commentary was written by Ronald Browder, director of the Children's Defense Fund – Ohio; and Mark Donaghy, president of the Ohio Public Transit Association. Learn about One Ohio Now at oneohionow.org.

In Ohio, as in most other states, we're facing tough times.

When unemployment rises, foreclosures mount and needs increase, families turn to public systems to provide a temporary helping hand. Unfortunately, though, that's easier said than done these days, especially at the state level.

The sad reality is that just as people's needs are rising dramatically, the resources to meet those needs are declining. In fact, Ohio and other states have seen unprecedented losses of revenue in this recession.

Most states mainly fund their operations from income and sales taxes, and when people aren't working or are working less, the amount they owe in those taxes goes down. Ohio also has cut taxes, especially benefiting wealthy residents, which has added to the financial stress.

The federal government can borrow for operating expenses. States can't do that, so in hard times, their options are more limited. Mainly, they can cut spending and increase taxes.

For the most part, Ohio has done more on the cutting side than the revenue side. That might seem to make sense, if we think that governments, like families, have to do without necessities during downturns. But if government just cuts spending during tough times, it creates a downward spiral, adding to private-sector layoffs and making the economy worse.

Ironically, cutting spending can make hard times harder, delaying a much-needed recovery.

States, like families, have to make sure they don't eat their seed corn. Prosperity has always come back and it will again. But in the meantime, we have to keep investing, so that we survive the downturn and emerge ready to thrive in the good times.

If we slash higher education, making tuition too high for the next generation of Ohio adults, we could be depriving tomorrow's workforce of the education it needs to attract employers.

If we feel unsafe because of cutbacks to sheriff, police and fire departments, Ohio will be inhospitable for residents and businesses alike.

If we further cut funding to our libraries — the nation’s best, by any measure — we impoverish our souls and reduce opportunities for residents. And if we continue allowing our parks to deteriorate, we harm our quality of life.

It’s crucial that we keep investing in Ohio’s people, schools, infrastructure and communities. If we try to deal with hard times only by cuts in spending, we risk hacking so much that we set ourselves back permanently.

What we need instead is a balanced approach to balancing the budget. Many of Ohio’s businesses and people, particularly the wealthiest, have had their taxes cut in recent years. These top earners benefit the most from our economic system; they can afford to pay more, and they should.

People understand this. Many polls show that Americans are willing to pay a little more to make sure there are good schools and colleges for their children, health care for those who need it, and services for seniors and others who struggle.

A new coalition called One Ohio Now is outlining proposals to balance spending cuts with reasonable, wise revenue investments. We urge people to take seriously what the individuals and organizations in One Ohio Now are suggesting.

Of course we always need to spend money efficiently and with the highest standards of accountability. The process of determining priorities needs to be open to everyone. But let’s make sure that everything is on the table, and that the conversation is honest, keeping the public good uppermost in mind.

This is not a time for glib-sounding, politically expedient “solutions.”