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Editorial: Good Idea, Times Three

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Despite much evidence to the contrary presented during the Republican presidential campaign, America is not entirely bereft of good ideas as 2015 wanes. Here are three gleaned from the Valley News during the past week or so.

Vermont will hold another “driver restoration day” on Dec. 11, in White River Junction. About 1,400 Windsor County residents whose driver’s licenses have been suspended for failure to pay outstanding traffic tickets will have the opportunity to pay \$25 per ticket to get their fines forgiven and their licenses reinstated. (Drivers from elsewhere in Vermont who received tickets in Windsor County are also eligible.)

This amnesty makes eminent good sense, since many of those who fail to pay have good cause — they are low-income residents who simply can’t afford it. The suspension of their licenses all too often either robs them of their ability to work and fulfill their parental responsibilities, or forces them to drive illegally (and, not incidentally, without insurance).

“I think that this is really a way for us to unshackle a lot of economic opportunity for Vermonters who can seize it,” says Christopher Curtis, a staff attorney with Vermont Legal Aid. That, and getting a lot of people back into the good graces of the law. Any system of fines so onerous that it results in large numbers of people being in violation is a system that needs fixing. A task force has been convened to address the subject legislatively, but in the meantime, restoration days provide at least a partial solution.

Another way of helping out the less fortunate was highlighted in a recent feature story about Hunters for the Hungry, a state-run program in Maine that allows hunters to donate their game to food pantries, soup kitchens and homeless shelters.

According to The Associated Press, the program generated about 1,000 pounds of deer, moose and bear meat per year when it started nearly 20 years ago; the total has now grown to 10,000 pounds annually. Hunters drop off the animals at one of 32 designated processors, and the state matches the processor with a nearby charity so the meat stays local, says program director Jason Hall. Thus the impoverished obtain a good source of protein, meat that otherwise might be wasted is put to good use, and hunters have the satisfaction of doing good. All this good is accomplished at a cost to the state of \$2,000 to \$4,000 a year.

The New Hampshire Fish and Game Department runs a similar program in conjunction with the New Hampshire Food Bank, and it took in about 1,200 pounds of meat last year. "The Hunt for the Hungry Program is a great way for hunters to share their harvest and help needy families get through the winter," says Glenn Normandeau, the department's executive director. "Wild game is a local renewable resource that is high in protein, low in fat and all natural — not to mention delicious."

Speaking of making good use of renewable resources — although in this case ones that enrich the greedy rather than aid the needy — we are intrigued by the effort of a college professor in Albany, N.Y., to capitalize on the state capital's notorious reputation for graft by establishing a Museum of Political Corruption. Fundraising is underway already, and Bruce Roter envisions attracting tourists and students to a bricks-and-mortar museum that documents New York State's long history of crooked politics, shining a light both on shady politicians and those who have opposed them.

A reminder that corruption is not merely of historical interest in Albany came earlier this week when Sheldon Silver, for two decades speaker of the State Assembly and one of New York state's most powerful politicians, was found guilty of seven federal corruption charges. Among the most interesting aspects of the case was that Silver's defense hinged on his lawyer's assertion that the kind of influence-peddling he was accused of is a way of life in Albany and that prosecutors were attempting to criminalize activity in which legislators routinely engage.

We'll definitely stop by if Roter succeeds. Museums that celebrate and illuminate some characteristic aspect of local culture and history are not to be missed.

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