

**HOST:** *Commentator Bill Schubart, who served on the Blue Ribbon Tax Commission, offers his thoughts on how the legislature might best approach managing in a time of budget deficits.*

**Commentator:** The legislature has a four-speed gear box: inaction, study, nibble around the edges, and overdrive. The under-utilized overdrive gear brings forth bold action and initiates substantive change. The perennial re-appearance of all-too-familiar problems argues for a shift into high gear.

We've studied and nibbled around the edges of our recurring problems for too long. The cost of patchwork repair now exceeds the cost of real change or, as twelve-steppers say, "When the pain of the present exceeds the pain of change, we change."

Vermont has endemic problems needing bold redesign: our tax code, our water quality management, our educational governance, our State College system, human services, and our public safety system, to name a few. Legislative nibbling around the edges of these problems now costs more than a bold fix.

Just as we should not look at one element of the tax code without assessing the merits of the whole, we should not watch our state colleges *cut-to-survive* without understanding the inherent value in each. Nor can we afford any longer to make niggling changes in our educational system. We must consolidate our resources where they are most needed, in training, hiring, and compensating the best teachers we can afford.

Strategic change, of course, creates winners and losers. Politicians don't like creating losers, especially if they're supporters. But taxpayers are tired of patch jobs that don't address endemic problems and keep adding incremental costs.

In a democracy, legislative representatives respond to the will of those who elect them. Unfortunately, that will is too often expressed by those with the organization, money, and power to do so. So in a *balance-the-budget* scramble for money in a *no-new-taxes* environment, the easier, softer way is to look for money at the expense of those with no voice rather than to look for solutions that improve long-term performance and value. We must look at our challenges with an eye toward preserving value, improving process, infrastructure and outcomes, and finally, transparency and accountability, not just finding revenue.

*Death-by-a-thousand-cuts* may save money in a budget year but hemorrhages intrinsic value over the long term. Nor does a wise businessman use *across-the-board* cuts, as these cuts can't differentiate waste from value. Good managers uncover redundancy and irrelevance and assess where future value lies. They cut strategically, redesign and redeploy limited resources.

We need to look beyond the present crisis, otherwise our problems, like revenants, will return annually to haunt us.

***Bill Schubart lives writes and works in Hinesburg. His latest book is the "Lamoille Stories II"***