

GUEST VIEW

Jesse Ramos: The compassion of saying no

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Money is on everyone's mind right now and for good reason. The city of Missoula just passed a historic tax increase of nearly **12%** in the middle of an inflationary spiral that was last reported at **8.6%**. Taking the opposite tack, the state government is sitting on a **\$1.5 billion budget surplus** and some Republicans are looking at ways to give

After serving on the City Council for four years, I can say that Missoula does not have a revenue problem; we have a spending problem. A recent report from **the Frontier Institute** shows how Missoula's budget since 2007 has grown 64% faster its own economy.

Politicians argue that they must raise taxes, fines, fees, and surcharges, add more taxes, pass more bonds, and issue more debt because there is never enough money. The questions that we need to ask ourselves are: how much is enough and what is the proper role of government? The city of Missoula received over **\$14 million** in the last round of federal COVID assistance alone. This number represents nearly one-third of all the funds raised in property taxes in fiscal 2022. The result? An additional 12% tax hike the very next year.

The truth is that elected leaders must face the fact that there will never be enough money to solve the societal woes they profess to be solving. I passionately believe that the city could confiscate a billion dollars from the taxpayers and still need to raise taxes the following year. The argument you hear most commonly is that state government is not

doing enough, so the city must “take matters” into its own hands. This is a distraction from the hard truth; society has many problems that cannot and will not be solved by the government. Even more uncomfortable is the fact that many of these problems are made worse by government involvement.

Ever-increasing taxes in Montana cities are not solving society’s problems but creating new ones. The wealth gaps are far higher in the largest cities with the highest taxes. Gentrification is happening right in front of us despite the promises from elected officials that higher taxes and more bonds will somehow prevent it.

Elected officials need to understand that the most compassionate thing they can do to help those struggling in their communities is to say “no:” Say no to bonds for a new ice rink at the fairgrounds, say no to big corporations that come to the city with their hands out and say no to increases in fines that have the largest impact on the lowest income earners.

Just because the government is not solving every social ill does not mean those problems will not be solved by the citizens themselves. Missoula ranks near the top of the United States in terms of non-profits per capita of the population. These nonprofit organizations fill societal gaps far more efficiently than the government. They ask for money; they do not force people to contribute to their missions. They prove their case and highlight their results to raise voluntary contributions.

We all heard the cries during the last legislative session that budget cuts and increased efficiencies would lead to terrible destruction and devastation. This is hardly what happened. Montana is in the top tier of states for low unemployment, wage growth, and overall happiness.

In addition, the state government now has a massive budget surplus and the opportunity to give Montanans a break from inflation.

I hope that local mayors, county commissioners, and city councils follow the lead of Governor Greg Gianforte and the state Legislature by treating taxpayer money with the care it deserves.

Jesse Ramos writes from a liberty-conservative point of view and is the community engagement director at Americans for Prosperity-Montana and a former Missoula City Council member representing Ward 4 from 2018 to 2022.