
https://trib.com/opinion/editorial/editorial-board-with-wyoming-at-a-crossroads-now-is-the-time-for-real-leadership/article_eac3be67-3a47-5ea3-809e-0e789b4ce725.html

EDITOR'S PICK

TOP STORY

Editorial board: With Wyoming at a crossroads, now is the time for real leadership

STAR-TRIBUNE EDITORIAL BOARD

Dec 6, 2020

SALE! Subscribe for \$1/mo.





The roof of the Wyoming Capitol peeks through the trees July 10, 2019, in Cheyenne.

Cayla Nimmo, Star-Tribune

STAR-TRIBUNE EDITORIAL BOARD

Stop us if you've heard this one.

Wyoming is struggling through an economic downturn, and the industries it's long relied upon to pay for schools and government services are no longer able to provide what they once did. Our elected leaders acknowledge that we must do things differently to set our state on a sustainable course. And then, when the chips are down, they slash services and wait for the energy sector to recover, avoiding difficult questions and hard truths for a few more years.

We've seen this play out before. And unfortunately, it appears to be happening again.

When Gov. Mark Gordon first announced the need for major reductions to state services, he did so while stressing that cuts alone couldn't solve the problem. It would take more to fill the shortfall in revenue brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, a sharp decline in oil prices, a glut in natural gas and falling demand for

coal. And yet, what we've observed since then has been an absence of leadership from both our legislative and executive branches.

Once again, the Wyoming Legislature's revenue committee has considered a slew of options and rejected most of them. Among the defeated proposals: an income tax on the state's wealthiest earners, a real estate transfer tax that would have mainly affected the ultra-wealthy in Jackson, and the elimination of sales tax exemptions on groceries, manufacturing properties and data centers. Even a proposal to increase the alcohol tax, which hasn't been raised since 1940, failed to move forward.

Instead, the committee advanced a bill that would raise the fuel tax, although by an amount that won't even address the shortfall in the Department of Transportation's budget. One lawmaker is also pursuing an increase on wind generation taxes, yet another attempt to export Wyoming's tax burden beyond our borders. Still, others point to our Rainy Day Fund as a miracle drug, but that only solves the problem in the short term.

Support Local Journalism

Your membership makes our reporting possible.

SALE! Subscribe for \$1/mo.

What we haven't seen is leadership. Nor have we seen a legitimate plan to put our state on sustainable footing. The inertia of doing nothing seems to have taken hold once again.

Our leaders are in state of denial. They don't want to acknowledge that looking to the energy industry to single-handedly solve our revenue problems isn't feasible. They don't want to acknowledge that change is coming in the form of a new, Democratic administration that will act less favorably to fossil fuels than the one in power until Jan. 20. Nor do they want to answer the most fundamental question posed by our current dilemma: Are we prepared to pay for the services we receive?

Much of this blame can be affixed to a Legislature that has failed to show leadership amid a pandemic that's sickened thousands of Wyomingites, killed hundreds and pushed our hospitals to the brink. Consider that they couldn't even agree to follow the health orders established by local governments in the majority of Wyoming counties. Instead, we have a farcical situation where lawmakers have acknowledged the reality of the pandemic by pushing back their legislative session, while at the same time scheduling two swearing-in ceremonies: one for those in masks, and another for those in denial. This is not how you lead by example.

But the executive branch can't avoid blame here, too. Yes, the Legislature must enact revenue increases. But history has shown us that governors can force the issue. Recall that Gov. Stan Hathaway in 1969 brought forward an unbalanced budget and a proposal to enact a severance tax on minerals, which ultimately passed and has become an essential source of state revenue.

There are reasons that our leaders have avoided the hard questions. For one, they are indeed difficult to answer. And they come with risk – of angering voters, of upsetting the status quo, of frustrating certain industries, of even putting one's political career in jeopardy. Nevertheless, we should ask elected officials who don't offer solutions, "What are you here for?"

After all, doing nothing carries its own risk. There is the risk that our state misses out on its dwindling opportunities to transition to a more sustainable future while it still has the money to do so. There is the risk that the most vulnerable members of our population – the young, the old and those with special needs – will lose critical services. And there is the risk that our young people decide amid cuts to schools and colleges to start their own families in a state with better prospects.

We don't elect our leaders to make the easy decisions. Anyone can do that. We look

to them to step up in trying times and chart a course to calmer waters. There is no more time to wait. Now is the time to lead.

 [View Comments](#)

Catch the latest in Opinion

Get opinion pieces, letters and editorials sent directly to your inbox weekly!

Email Address	Sign up!
---------------	--------------------------

* I understand and agree that registration on or use of this site constitutes agreement to its user agreement and [privacy policy](#).

Related to this story

Meet the Casper Star-Tribune editorial board

Updated Dec 5, 2020


