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Independence Day Allegheny County Style

The Fourth of July is upon us once again. The nation's most revered and meaningful non-religious holiday prompts us to view governmental actions through the lens of the ideals of our Founding documents. And true to form, our local governments never fail to serve up examples of how far we have moved from those ideals. On July 1, County Council provided a great and recent example of the failure to remember a key tenet of the *Declaration of Independence*; to wit, that *governments derive their just power from the consent of the governed*.

Responding to a Republican request to have the voters decide in a November referendum whether to reduce dramatically the drink tax and car rental tax while holding the property tax rate steady, the Council president called the proposal the most irresponsible piece of legislation he had seen in several years. The Council president was further quoted in newspaper accounts as saying "This is basically an amendment to shut this government down."

Another majority member of Council chimed in that the proposal would lead to massive layoffs and devastate the County.

In short, the majority party Council members do not trust the electorate to weigh the benefits against possible negative effects and make an informed decision. They would rather continue to punish narrow sectors of the economy to fund mass transit than to do the responsible thing and fund it with a broader tax as public finance principles would dictate.

What was truly irresponsible, as well as arrogant, was the willingness of Council to levy the two new taxes on a party line vote—the one Republican who voted for the drink tax later switched parties so his Republican affiliation was in name only at the time of the vote. To complete the irresponsibility, the money collected thus far is sitting idle while being held hostage in contract negotiations with transit workers—an action that could cause the state to withhold matching funds.

But the astounding part of the Council's majority is the disdain with which they view taxpayers and voters. We are taught in this country that government exists for the benefit of the voters, citizens and taxpayers. If voters think reducing the size of government is a

reasonable trade for getting lower taxes, why does Council believe it should stand in the way? The answer to that is actually very simple. Those in charge of the government have come to believe the people are sheep and that special interests such as County employees and their unions are the true source of power and therefore must be catered to.

The crucial point here is that the only real safeguard the citizens have against ever encroaching government is the power to restrain the government's authority to tax. By denying the people the right to vote on the Republican referendum proposal, the Council majority is saying they don't trust the electorate with its own governance. Indeed, they are obviously afraid the electorate would roll back the two new taxes and force the Council to do the hard work of finding ways to cut spending by the amount of the lost revenue.

So what we have is the spectacle of the Council majority saying they don't want to make those hard budget cutting decisions even if it is the express will of the people, which they are apparently certain it is. Where is their confidence in their ability to persuade voters that rolling back the new taxes is a dreadful thing to do? If they are genuine in their belief that it would be a disaster for the County, they should be able to convince a majority of voters to say no to the tax roll back.

Obviously, not every matter of governance needs to go the people for approval or rescission. That would be too cumbersome and unworkable; hence elected representatives. But the most important safeguard the people have in protecting themselves from expansive government—the right to vote on taxes—must always remain viable and respected by elected officials.

Allegheny County voters adopted home rule in order to give the people a greater degree of input into and say about what government does. Have we already forgotten those high-minded sentiments and dispensed with the need to honor them?

As we continue to hope for movement toward restoration of fealty to the Founders' vision at all levels of government, the staff of the Allegheny Institute wish you a very Happy Fourth of July.

Jake Haulk, Ph.D. President

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