

Arizona Daily Star®

www.dailystar.com® @www.azstarnet.com®

Published: 10.30.2008

State getting an earful on saving money

By Howard Fischer

CAPITOL MEDIA SERVICES

PHOENIX — Rescind special tax breaks for business.

Reduce the number of managers.

Increase taxes on liquor.

And keep government vehicles from going faster than 55.

It turns out Arizonans are full of ideas for how to get the state out of its billion-dollar hole. They apparently just needed a way let the state know.

That opportunity was created earlier this month when Gov. Janet Napolitano set up what amounts to an online suggestion box. So far about 600 proposals have been received, some to cut expenses and some to raise more money.

A sampling of the suggestions turned up several that would be simple to implement, some that would require changes in state law and some that, for political reasons, are unlikely to get very far.

Consider one proposal to repeal a 1994 law that essentially pays businesses to collect the state sales tax.

It allows companies to keep 1 percent of what they collect, up to \$10,000 a year. The Department of Revenue figures the state loses more than \$22 million a year.

But the measure was adopted by the Republican-controlled Legislature and signed by Republican Gov. Fife Symington amid stiff lobbying by businesses that insisted they are entitled to be reimbursed for their costs of collecting the state tax.

Repealing it would generate protests from affected firms. And because of the way the state constitution is worded, it also likely would take a two-thirds vote of the Legislature.

Several proposals suggested hiking the state tax on alcohol — the drinking kind. That proposal, one writer said, would do more than generate revenues.

"The drunks in this state cost us so much money and pain," he wrote. Fewer accidents would mean savings on police and medical costs.

Another suggestion that came from outside state government proposed removing all the plants installed along state roads and replacing them with rocks or stone mosaics. That cuts both the maintenance costs and water bills.

Alan Ecker, spokesman for the Department of Administration, said a related suggestion to stop planting winter lawns in front of state-owned buildings already has been implemented. The only state offices that are going to have green grass this winter, he said, are the ones in leased office space.

A third person suggested delaying the beautification project that will accompany the widening of I-10 through Tucson. She said the painting of the walls could be delayed, with the work eventually done by prison inmates.

An employee at the state Department of Health Service said the current purchase-order process requires five sheets of paper before it leaves the office to get paid. She said electronic imaging would save some of that paper.

Speak up

Want to offer a suggestion of your own? Go to az.gov/oss and click on "Submit an Idea."

The proposal to limit state-owned vehicles to 55 mph also included a plan to lower the maximum speed limit in Arizona to 65 miles per hour — and maybe even to 55 after the election. That would require legislation, as speed limits now are set by the state Department of Transportation based on engineering and traffic studies.

There also were several proposals to cut the number of state workers, or at least some of their salaries.

One person who identified himself as a 20-year state employee said there are too many middle managers who have received "extravagant pay raises." Another said it is "time to clean up the extra fat at the top of many state agencies."

A third said the Department of Administration is "a classic example of promotions gone wild." And another proposed eliminating "non-essential, administrative glamour positions" at state universities.

Other proposals include:

- Testing all state workers for drugs under the premise that those who test positive will quit and the state won't have to pay severance.
- Using secure e-mail rather than mailing or faxing documents to taxpayers.
- Reducing the use of outside consultants.
- Implementing a moratorium on training, workshops, retreats and similar activities by state workers.

Speak up

Want to offer a suggestion of your own? Go to az.gov/oss and click on "Submit an Idea."

All content copyright © 1999-2008 AzStarNet, Arizona Daily Star and its wire services and suppliers and may not be republished without permission. All rights reserved. Any copying, redistribution, or retransmission of any of the contents of this service without the expressed written consent of Arizona Daily Star or AzStarNet is prohibited.