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Why we pay taxes

By Elaine Ditsler

We all dislike having to pay for things, whether it is cable television, gas for our car, or our taxes. But as any economist will tell you, there is no such thing as a free lunch. Yes, taxes even challenge us to think beyond ourselves about the greater good. But isn't that healthy? Most of the year, we take our high living standards, our schools, our streets, our rights, and our freedom for granted. We are blessed to be living in a country where not only do we have a vote, but we have many opportunities to participate in public affairs, especially at the local level.

Taxes are what corporations and people pay for the rule of law and for the public services that benefit all of us. I believe we have a shared responsibility to educate our children and to provide a safety net for families, the disabled, the sick and the aged. These are things that government does well. The Social Security system, for example, has been a major triumph, greatly reducing poverty rates among the elderly and doing so very efficiently. Public investments in early childhood education have an especially high rate of return on investment by increasing the earnings and productivity of workers, reducing crime, and strengthening the economy. To meet the challenges of a global economy we need to invest more in our education system at all levels. Only the public sector is up to this challenge.

Government is also the only institution that can protect the average citizen from air and water pollution, and protect our workers from unsafe and unhealthy working conditions. Only the authority of government can counterbalance the enormous power exerted by large private institutions like Exxon and Enron over our daily lives.

The public sector certainly is not without fault and the democratic process can be slow and cumbersome. But thanks to the transparency of our system, we usually know about it when someone messes up. If the people who run our government at a particular time do not reflect the priorities of the average person, we still have the ability to replace them with leaders who will. As Katrina showed us all, government institutions can perform admirably (the Coast Guard) and miserably (FEMA) depending on who we put in charge of those institutions and the resources we give them.

During this tax season, I would like to thank those Iowans who work in our public schools, maintain our roads, collect our garbage, patrol our streets, and do all the other things I take for granted. The vast majority of these Iowans work hard, with little thanks and lower pay than their private sector counterparts. Iowa's public schools are among the best in the country, yet teacher pay is among the lowest. It is time that we respect our public servants, even if we don't always agree with the politicians they work for.

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