

## Share the wealth views stir anew in Colorado

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You've probably heard the joke about the gambler who said, "I hope I break even today. I really need the money."

That about sums up the Colorado Fiscal Policy Institute's report, "Aiming for the Middle." It concludes Colorado would need to spend \$3.3 billion just to reach the national average expenditure levels in key areas like elementary and secondary schools, health care, Medicaid, higher education and highways.

The current state budget has just \$7.8 billion in its general fund. That means we'd have to boost state spending - and taxes - by about 40 percent to match other states.

If you will now pause, gentle reader, and cock your ear toward Boulder, you can hear the sound of Jon Caldara shrieking:

*"A 40 percent tax increase? A \$3.3 billion tax increase? Ay, caramba!"*

I mention Jon to underscore the difference between the Independence Institute he heads and its newer ideological foes, which include the Bell Policy Center and the Colorado Fiscal Policy Institute.

Independence and its predecessor, the Shavano Institute, have long been a potent force in Colorado, preaching that the only thing better than low taxes is no taxes. One reason for its prominence was that it lacked a worthy local foe on the left.

Indeed, I long argued there is "no left left" in Colorado, in the sense of the New Deal-style tax-and-spend, share-the-wealth policies. Steve McNichols was the last Democratic governor who could be fairly described as a big spender. Big Steve, who served the last two-year term and the first four-year term as Colorado governor between 1957 and 1963, raised taxes and vigorously promoted highways, education and other state institutions. He was trounced by John Love in 1962, who campaigned on a tax-cut pledge.

The next Democratic governor, Dick Lamm, came into office in 1975 sharing an "era of limits" philosophy with Mike Dukakis in Massachusetts and Jerry Brown in California. Lamm proved his fiscal conservatism by submitting budgets that called for a reduction in state per capita spending when adjusted for inflation. His Republican predecessors, Love and John Vanderhoof, had consistently called for increases in real per capita spending.

In place of the old economic left, the young liberals behind Lamm's banner focused on environmental issues. That environmental left has come back with renewed zest on Gov. Bill Ritter's watch.

But just when I thought it was safe to go back to hugging trees and dodging taxes, into my office strode Carol Hedges and Scott Downes from the Fiscal Policy Institute. In rapid succession, Hedges detailed:

Colorado ranks 34 in elementary and secondary per pupil spending. To get to the U.S. average would cost \$672.5 million.

We're 47th in Medicaid per capita spending - \$993 million short of the U.S. average.

We're 48th in state support of higher education - \$467 million short of the national average.

We're 39th in highways - \$139.4 million short of the norm.

That's \$2.3 billion annually right there. Overall, Colorado would need to spend \$3.3 billion more annually to match national averages.

You can get the full report at [www.cclponline.org](http://www.cclponline.org).

When I asked Hedges how Colorado could close such a funding gap, she answered with a word long banned from polite political society in Colorado: the T-word.

"Raise taxes."

What followed was a long passage from "Smart Women, Foolish Pundits." In essence, Hedges argued for higher taxes on business and extending the tax base by including services in the sales tax.

What impressed me more than her arguments was that Hedges brought a forcefulness and intellectual rigor I'm more used to seeing on the libertarian right in the likes of Caldara and Jessica Peck Corry.

Reading the report and listening to Hedges' impassioned arguments, I realized one thing:

The left - the economic left - is finally back in Colorado.