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Your Tax Dollars at Work

by John R. La Plante

Following up on my article in the June issue of Perspective, here are some more examples of frivolous, wasteful, and counterproductive spending in Oklahoma.

Duplicative Health Insurance

Under current rules, state agencies purchase health insurance for employees, even for those whose spouses have insurance elsewhere. Governor Henry proposed to let any employee whose spouse is insured elsewhere to opt out of the state's insurance program. The proposal, announced in the FY-2004 executive budget, contains a provision that employees receive an in-lieu payment of \$40 per month. They would be able to reselect state coverage in case of a change in the spouse's employment or insurance situation. Projected savings are \$247 per employee – meaning that taxpayers are paying at least that much to offer state employees duplicative coverage.

Boll Weevil Eradication

One problem with setting up a government program to solve a problem is that while the problem may go away (perhaps due to the program, perhaps not), the program does not. Such appears to be the case with boll weevils. Even though the Oklahoma Boll Weevil Eradication Organization has helped reduce the pest's population by over 99.99 percent, the state plans to spend \$4.2 million for further work. Federal funding is expected to be \$4 million, with the cotton industry – the party most interested in eradicating this pest – putting up \$11 million.

The cotton industry, like any industry, faces business challenges. Why should it get any special favors from state taxpayers who labor in other agricultural pursuits, retailing jobs, manufacturing, or other industries? Perhaps at one time, the problem was so large that it required taxpayer dollars. But those days are long gone. Let the industry pay its own keep.

Surplus Conservation Districts

There are 88 Conservation Districts in the state. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has reduced the number of Natural Resources Conservation Service offices from 88 to 77, or one per county. Governor Henry suggested cutting the number of Conservation Cost Share Districts from 88 to 77, resulting in a savings of nearly \$60,000 per office. Perhaps there's room for further consolidation.

Tourism Overreach

The Department of Tourism and Recreation operates state lodges. Is it really a proper function of government to be in innkeeping business? The state also operate four resorts within Western Hills, Texoma, Lake Murray, and Roman Nose parks, which have received over \$3.2 million in state subsidies over the last four years. Even if these resorts were able to turn a profit, the private sector has no shortage of companies and individuals specializing in operating resorts.

Oklahoma's former tourism boss indicated her "greatest concern remains the lack of funding for the size of state park system that we have. By increasing the system through the years, but not the operational and maintenance funding, we, as a state, may have sentenced the system to mediocrity at best when the natural resources of Oklahoma state parks are among the richest in the nation."

True enough, it's shameful to own something and not take care of it. So why, then, has

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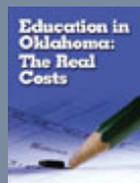
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state government been expanding the park system when it does not have the money to take care of what it already has? It looks like a classic case of overreach.

Certiably Wasteful

The Commission on Teacher Preparation encourages teachers to become certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). The state currently pays a \$5,000 bonus to teachers who receive board certification.

The Commission reimburses each teacher \$2,300 to cover the program's application fee and \$200 for materials. You'd think teachers would have enough of an incentive to participate without the state providing a risk-free entry into the program. Even more troubling, the Commission pays the costs of each teacher, regardless of whether the teacher completes the program or receives certification. This is in stark contrast with many corporate programs in which an employee must earn a specified grade in order to receive employer reimbursement.

The state budget for fiscal year 2004 called for another \$2.9 million for teachers who achieve NBPTS certification, as well as increases for those who already have it. But are taxpayers getting their money's worth? As OCPA has documented repeatedly, it's hard to say that they are. There is no hard evidence that students learn more from NBPTS-certified teachers than similar teachers who lack that certification. If current certification requirements are not good enough to ensure teacher quality, perhaps some other avenues – such as school choice, competition, and merit pay – ought to be tried.

If At First You Don't Succeed, Spend Again

Some hotels, both high-priced and more budget-oriented, offer money-back guarantees if customers are not satisfied. Consumer goods offer product warranties to ensure the buyer won't have to pay for something that falls apart shortly after purchase. But taxpayers buy defective services all the time – from schools. Over one-third of all first-year students at Oklahoma's public colleges and universities require remedial courses. This means that some of the original funds spend on K-12 schooling were wasted, and the schooling will have to be conducted again, at the higher-priced university level.

"American education is so expensive in large measure because we pay for it twice," former assistant secretary of education Chester Finn has observed. "We send kids to high school to pick up the knowledge and skills they ought to have learned in elementary school. We send them to college to acquire a decent secondary education."

A few years ago, Dr. Jay Greene calculated that failed K-12 schooling cost Michigan businesses and universities \$600 million, at a minimum, per year. Oklahoma's population is slightly more than one-third of Michigan's, so if the problems in the two states are similar, the cost to Oklahoma of remedial education is at the least \$200 million per year.

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Is This a Proper Function of Government?

Oklahoma's state government gives thousands of your dollars to a multi-million-dollar organization that hardly needs taxpayer support. According to records on file at the Oklahoma State Department of Health, a \$147,989 contract with Planned Parenthood of Arkansas and Eastern Oklahoma allows Planned Parenthood "to provide family planning and maternity services to uninsured and underinsured women and men."

The stated goal of another contract with Planned Parenthood (this one for \$26,841) is "to increase correct and consistent use of male condoms and insertion condoms during receptive vaginal and anal intercourse among youth (ages 13-19) and their sexual partners within the Tulsa, Oklahoma MSA." Oklahoma taxpayers are paying for condoms, lube kits, and insertion condoms.

Whatever one may think of the merits of anal sodomy among 13-year-olds, or of Planned

Parenthood itself, the question needs to be asked: Should state government be funding this stuff?

— *Brandon Dutcher*

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