

Bill of Rights allows voters to put lid on taxes

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The Feb. 15 Your Turn “Taxpayers Don’t need a Bill of Rights”, by Jim Mr. Miller of the League of Minnesota Cities, raises some interesting objections to the proposed Taxpayers Bill of Rights.

TABOR, as it is also known, says that governments should not, absent a vote of the people, grow any faster than what population growth and inflation require.

Miller objects that TABOR is fueled by a false belief that “good government can be had with minimal effort.” Apparently, he thinks that citizens ought to spend more time watching “Almanac” and attending legislative hearings.

There is no contradiction, however, between pursuing good government and having institutional restraints such as TABOR.

Indeed, this country’s founders created the original Bill of Rights knowing that institutional restraints are essential for good government. Today, we all enjoy some measure of good government “with minimal effort” because the original Bill of Rights protects us.

The balanced budget requirements and line-item veto that most states use are two other institutional restraints. These, too, allow the public to have good government with minimal effort. Thanks to them, the governor can eliminate egregious cases of waste, and the state cannot run debts for operating expenses.

TABOR simply continues in the tradition of using institutional restraints to promote good government with minimal effort by the public.

Miller further argues that “government-by-autopilot cannot work in today's changing world.” He warns against making predictions about the future — as if TABOR assumes super-human forecasting powers.

It’s certainly true we cannot predict the future. That’s exactly the reason why TABOR allows governments to ask the voters for permission to raise taxes. It happens all the time in Colorado, where local governments that clearly explain what they plan to do with new money win voter approval for tax increases roughly half of the time.

Is the requirement for voter approval unreasonable?

Miller seems to think so, saying “plebiscites become increasingly impractical in our changing world.” Impractical? Only for those who think that government decisions are

best made only by those willing to spend countless hours wrapped up in the political process.

Perhaps Miller dislikes the exercise of going to the voters because it makes the job of elected officials a bit more difficult.

Pardon me for not being too concerned about the challenges of that task. Someone facing more rather than less scrutiny? With our hard-earned dollars, certainly.