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Be it Resolved: 'Yes, There is an Alternative'

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Last week I reported on a number of Wisconsin public subsidies that hurt the environment. Such subsidies are basically perverse in that they pay people to do bad things. They're sort of like paying people to start smoking, or to drive at murderous speeds in residential neighborhoods. And yet when it comes to the environment, we do just that. If the current state administration had its way, in fact, we'd do it even more.

The perversity of anti-environment subsidies is evident both in their "direct" costs, or the money we pay to support them and the resulting damage that the behavior we pay for does to the environment, and their "opportunity" costs, or what we lose by not doing something else that doing them effectively precludes. I want to examine the direct costs to get a better sense of the sheer amount of damage. But I also want to look at the opportunity costs, because their inventory poses the really interesting question of alternatives. What if we abolished these and related subsidies? How much money would be made available for environment-improving investments, especially those that might yield new "green job" opportunities in the state?

Asking this question of environmental policy I hope is interesting in itself; it also raises two broader observations about how we, as a society, set priorities.

The first is simply that our priorities are massively, and I mean massively, screwed up. You don't have to be a wild-eyed radical to think this. Just go back to the Declaration of Independence or U.S. Constitution and be reminded that the whole point of our democracy -- the reason we fought for freedom from England in the first place and have struggled with ourselves ever since -- is to "promote the general welfare" and the "pursuit of happiness." And then look at the budget of the United States, where we in fact spend a huge number of our tax dollars, perhaps most of them, on other things, while neglecting obvious social ills that make people unnecessarily miserable and unhappy.

There are so many examples of this it's hard to know where to start, but here are two of my favorites.

Bailouts to the savings and loan industry: We continue to spend tens of billions annually, and by the end will have spent about a trillion smack-dab, mopping up after (i.e., rewarding) the owners of the savings and loan industry for the crisis they created in the 1980s. This is a really shameless scam on the public treasury -- from which our current president mightily benefited in an earlier life -- since it basically amounts to paying people for neglecting their responsibilities and violating the spirit, and often the letter, of the law.

And yet as we spend billions for the bankers, we don't seem to have the relatively trivial amount of cash it would take to repair crumbling school buildings or get all kids health insurance. If your average red-blooded American thinks money is better spent educating children and making sure they're healthy, rather than paying back, again and again, stupid and greedy bankers for illegal behavior, where we should be putting our tax dollars is pretty clear. But what government does is quite another thing. That's screwed up priorities.

Bloated military spending: Remember the Soviet Union? The Cold War? The bear in the forest? All ancient history now. Now remember the "peace dividend" -- the cutback in military spending that would presumably follow from the end of the Cold War? Also ancient history, as military spending continues to surge right along at pre-Cold War levels. Ask ordinary folks if we really need to spend more on the military than the next dozen or so nations combined, and they might wonder. Ask any serious student of the military not now employed by the Pentagon -- or, privately, and if you promise not to tell on them, quite a few who are -- and they'll tell you we could easily cut a hundred or more billion from our bloated military budget and still be, far and away, the world's greatest and most invincible military power. And yet we don't. So billions for new bombers, but only a pittance for child care or, recently, for keeping half of Africa from dying of AIDS. That too shows screwed up priorities.

But here's the second observation: Don't believe anybody who tells you there's no alternative.

Did you ever notice that when it comes to certain sorts of problems, we're told we can't afford solutions, while for others money can always miraculously be found? Just before we found billions for those savings and loan executives, for example, Ronald Reagan was telling us we couldn't find any money for Head Start and other preschool programs for poor kids. It matters, of course, who takes the hit for inaction. A good rule of thumb is that if it's rich people, it's a national emergency, and we've all got to spring into action. If it's poor or moderate-income people, well, it's just the way of the world, the way the old cookie crumbles.

* But the all-time cookie of inevitability, and the politician's favorite claim, is: "There is no alternative," aka TINA. Now TINA is a real monster, not just a misunderstood but lovable one like in Shrek. TINA says, again and again, "There's nothing else to be done." This is a lie, since for almost all stupid public policies there is a better alternative, and not just a hypothetical one but one that could be practically implemented now. But TINA also kills social experiment, innovation, improvement, learning, and, eventually, conscience, hope, social solidarity and confidence -- all the things a functioning democracy should engender. TINA must be slain if democratic discussion is to be had.

So henceforth, let's just declare TINA dead, shall we, as we begin a full cost assessment of Wisconsin's environmental laws? The results will amaze you. A real tonic for the soul, this democratic discussion business!

Joel Rogers teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is founder and director of the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS), which administers the Sustaining Wisconsin campaign. This is another in a weekly series of Capital Times columns he's writing on issues in the campaign. For more information, see www.cows.org and www.sustainingwisconsin.org.

On Jan. 29, COWS debuted "Sustaining Wisconsin," a statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin. The themes expressed in this view of the state of the state will carry through the next 18 months as COWS uses Sustaining Wisconsin to put the Wisconsin Idea into action.

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