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My Voice: Voters must press for real answers on U.S. debt

Don C. Dahlin • October 19, 2010

While there are debates about the wisdom of bank bailouts and the federal stimulus bill, most agree that the overall federal debt, approaching \$14 trillion and growing, is a major problem.

There are only three

realistic ways to reduce the long-term debt: increase

revenues, cut expenditures or use some combination.

A fourth way - to grow our way out of this problem - doesn't seem realistic given that we have had a balanced budget only four times in the past 40 years.

On option No. 1, the current debate is whether to extend the Bush tax cuts.

Extending these cuts for an additional 10 years, as U.S. House candidate Kristi Noem and U.S. Sen. John Thune propose, would add about \$3.9 trillion to the national debt over those 10 years. U.S. Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin supports a one- to two-year extension of all tax cuts but opposes a permanent renewal because of the cost. U.S. Sen. Tim Johnson supports extending the tax cuts only for families earning less than \$250,000. That proposal adds \$3.2 trillion to the national debt over 10 years.

Obviously, no one is proposing to tackle the debt by increasing revenue. Indeed, all - but especially the Republicans - are proposing a huge increase in the debt.

This opposition to increasing revenue also takes option No. 3 off the table.

If cutting expenditures is the only option, what are the expenditures to cut?

On this question, the lack of specificity is dismaying. Fortunately, the Cato Institute, a respected conservative Washington think tank, has offered specific budget-reduction proposals and estimated their annual dollar savings:

- Eliminate K-12 federal education programs -

\$40 billion.

- Eliminate farm subsidies - \$25 billion.
- Withdraw troops from Iraq and Afghanistan and eliminate unnecessary overseas missions - \$100 billion.
- Eliminate funding of state and local transportation projects and privatize air traffic control - \$85 billion.
- Eliminate federal housing subsidies - \$45 billion.
- Cut federal worker pay 10 percent - \$20 billion.
- Eliminate federal energy subsidies - \$20 billion.
- Convert Medicare to vouchers and Medicaid to fixed block grants - \$100 billion.
- Return drug policy to states - \$15 billion.
- Phase out mandatory Social Security; until then, tie benefit growth to price inflation - \$50 billion by 2020. The total is \$480 billion. Two points about these proposals: First, because current and projected federal budget deficits significantly exceed \$480 billion, enacting all of these cuts would not address reducing the overall federal debt at all. Second, would we want members of our congressional delegation to support all of these proposed cuts? What, then, to do about the federal debt? Here are three suggestions: First, decide where you come down on this



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specifically they plan to reduce expenditures enough to reduce the federal debt. Don't take glittering generalities for an answer. Third, insist that members of our congressional delegation pledge to allow votes on the recommendations that will be forthcoming from the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform. This is an 18-member bipartisan commission chaired by former Sen. Alan Simpson, a former Republican senator from Wyoming, and Erskine Bowles, chief of staff to President Clinton. Their charge is to identify "policies to improve the fiscal situation in the medium term and to achieve fiscal sustainability over the long run." At least 14 of the 18 members must approve the final report. Getting a pledge to allow votes on commission recommendations is especially critical because, otherwise, the Senate can use the 60-vote filibuster to stop passage of any recommendation. Addressing the federal debt is a critical issue. If we are serious about addressing it, we need to hold candidates' and elected officials' feet to the fire. Let's insist they be specific in telling us how they plan to cut the federal debt, and let's insist as well that they pledge to allow voting on the recommendations of the national

commission. My Voice

Don C. Dahlin, 69, of Vermillion is a retired professor of political science at the University of South Dakota. My Voice guest columns should be 500-700 words. Submissions should include a portrait-type photo of the author. Authors also should include their full name, age, address, occupation and relevant organizational memberships. Send columns to Argus Leader, Box 5034, Sioux Falls, SD 57117-5034, fax them to 605-331-2294 or e-mail them to letters@ argusleader.com.



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