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We need to reverse our state's brain drain [column]

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It's a lovely family reunion. Dad and Mom — now Grandpa and Grandma — sit facing their kids, and their kids' kids, reminiscing about old times and laughing about the trials of parenting. Then, in mid-sentence, Grandpa stutters and freezes — his face replaced by an hourglass on a black screen.

Video chat is down again.

This is an experience shared by tens of thousands of Pennsylvania families — including my own — whose adult children now live out of state. Technology and frequent-flyer miles can bridge our communication gap somewhat, but two of my three children now reside outside of Pennsylvania, and that can be tough.

A big reason many Pennsylvania families are experiencing these kinds of long-distance gaps? The next generation is looking for opportunity and finding it elsewhere.

In 2016, according to the Pennsylvania State Data Center, the commonwealth lost nearly 260,000 residents in a single year of interstate migration — the eighth-highest level in the country. It's a "brain drain" that's especially acute among college-educated millennials.

In the last six years on record, our state lost nearly 32,000 college-educated individuals between the ages of 18 and 34. According to the Cato Institute, they're moving from high-tax states to low-tax states, and Pennsylvania is on the wrong side of the equation.

The good news? We can turn this around by controlling the growth of state government spending that's driving up taxes and stifling innovation and entrepreneurship.

In fact, a statewide poll of Pennsylvania registered voters, conducted in early autumn by Susquehanna Polling & Research, showed wide support for commonsense limits on state spending growth: Republicans, Democrats and independents each reported at least 67% support for the measure.

A Franklin & Marshall College poll in October found that Pennsylvanians think "taxes" are the most important issue facing the state. By a significant margin, voters cared more about taxes than immigration, education, crime and health care.

Any politician can run on cutting taxes to win over the tax-hawk voters — but when state legislators get to Harrisburg, the pressures of office and tough budget decisions often drag them into overspending. What we need are guardrails against overspending that will help keep lawmakers on track.

Fiscal conservatives in the state House and Senate are proposing a constitutional amendment, called the Taxpayer Protection Act, to do just that. House Bill 1316, sponsored by Rep. Ryan Warner, R-Westmoreland County, and Senate Bill 116, sponsored by Sen. Camera Bartolotta, R-Washington County, would allow state spending to grow at a sustainable rate —\!q measured by inflation, plus population growth. This would ensure that spending doesn't grow faster than families' ability to pay.

The Taxpayer Protection Act would not require cuts in spending, just caps. And the caps could be exceeded in rare cases of emergency — a natural disaster or severe economic downturn, for example — through a supermajority vote in the General Assembly.

More protections against overspending are exactly what Pennsylvania needs. Since 1970, state spending has increased 48 out of 49 years, according to our analysis. And often, state government even spends above and beyond what has been budgeted — last year, to the tune of $687 million.

Consequently, the state's total operating budget has more than tripled over the last 50 years while our population has grown just 10%. Pennsylvania now has one of the highest tax burdens in the country, averaging nearly $4,600 in state and local taxes per person.

It's no wonder educated young people are leaving: The Keystone State ranks near the bottom in both growth and income growth since 2001. And ours is the fifth-worst state in which to start a business, according to WalletHub. Why would a Penn State or Carnegie Mellon graduate want to start his or her career in a place with such steep economic hills?

In contrast, states that limit spending growth maintain a relatively low tax burden, which is critical to economic growth. Those are the states beating Pennsylvania and draining our best and brightest. Enacting the Taxpayer Protection Act will stem the need for state government to hike taxes and provide an opportunity for economy-boosting tax cuts.

When Pennsylvania once again becomes a destination state for job creators and job seekers, college graduates won't have to go looking elsewhere to launch their careers. And so many families won't have to resort to FaceTime or Skype to catch up. It all starts with ensuring state government spends within taxpayers' means.