



Ham-handed 10-cent gas measure could set school funding back years

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So, Utahns really don't want to fund public schools, right?

I mean, for years we've heard people say the public gladly would support higher taxes to help Utah's overcrowded classrooms and underpaid teachers, if only given the chance. The Legislature, the thinking went, stood in the way of that.

Well, voters had their chance Tuesday. A non-binding resolution asking them if they would add 10 cents per gallon to the gas tax, with most of the money being funneled to education, went down in flames. As I write this, the unofficial tally is 66 percent against, 33 percent in favor.

That qualifies not just as a no, but one prefaced by the expletive of your choice.

Put it together with passage of the medical marijuana initiative and you have a bit of a public image problem for the state. Utahns have lost their minds. They want to forget about schools and smoke dope.

Which is why bumper stickers and tweets are horrible ways to interpret the world around you.

If you think the gas-tax question was a referendum on public school funding, you're wrong. It was a referendum on a tangled and confusing mess of tax soup that even a group of adorable children couldn't salvage in television ads.

What were we voting on again? Making gas more expensive so some money could go to schools, some to state colleges and universities and some to local roads? Isn't the income tax supposed to fund education? What do gas taxes have to do with schools?

Some people in my neighborhood were confused by the non-binding part, thinking it meant the Legislature might decide to use the money for other things, instead. That wasn't the intent of last year's Legislature, but technically next year's Legislature could have done just that.

Others worried the extra 10 cents, which would send the average price of a gallon near or above \$3 again, would hurt the poor and elderly.

Most of all, people were just confused, and when that happens, they tend to vote no.

Ironically, this all started with a much simpler idea. The interest group "Our Schools Now," led by some of the state's most notable philanthropists and former political leaders, came up with an idea to raise the income tax from 5 percent to 5 7/8 percent, with all the increase — more than \$700 million — going to education.

That idea was beginning to catch on, which horrified many state lawmakers. They viewed an income-tax hike as bad for the state's competitiveness and, thus, the economy.

So instead, the group began circulating a petition that called for a more modest income tax hike and a sales tax increase. They were ready to qualify this idea for the ballot when lawmakers brokered a deal. If Our Schools Now dropped the petition drive completely, they would freeze property tax rates, allowing schools to receive more money as land values rise, index the state's basic levy for schools and let voters decide whether lawmakers should raise the gas tax. The income tax — the primary vehicle for school funding — would be left untouched.

I listened to the debates at the state Capitol. Many lawmakers felt this would be a perfect way to better connect roads to the gas tax. The 10-cent hike would allow the state to take money from the general fund, which had been used for roads, and put it toward education instead.

But complicated accounting maneuvers do not make for great ballot questions.

A straight income and sales tax idea might have passed; or maybe not. No one knows, now, just as no one really knows what happens next, even though the other components of the deal remain in place.

Last March, I predicted the plan came with great risk. A rejection of the gas tax could be seen as a rejection of the notion for more school funding.

Admittedly, the correlation between school funding and the performance of public school students is weak. Utah may rank consistently last in the nation for per pupil spending, but studies, such as one by the Cato Institute that recently was published in Reason magazine, show that the highest-spending states do not necessarily produce the best schools.

Utah ranks toward the upper middle pack in terms of learning.

This does not mean that carefully directed extra money for Utah schools is a bad idea. Unfortunately, the gas tax question was a ham-handed effort whose failure might set better solutions back for years.