



Rob Roper: To turn around, you have to change direction

Rob Roper

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We have some pretty serious issues facing our state: a shrinking workforce, a public school system that is hemorrhaging students while it vacuums money, and a structural state budget deficit, to name just a few. These problems are not new, and the policies our state government has enacted to address them have not worked. Vermonters are now among the most highly taxed people in the country, but what do we have to show for it?

Today we spend roughly \$1.6 billion to educate 77,000 K through 12 students. That's well over \$20,000 per child, more than almost every other state in the union and nearly twice the national average. This is more than twice the total we paid before Act 60 became law in 1997, despite serving 30,000 fewer kids in 2017.

Student outcomes are not improving, and, if anything, they are declining. In the latest round of standardized tests, only 48 percent of Vermont's students were learning enough to be considered proficient in their subjects. In every category in every grade but one, scores fell between 2016 and 2017.

This, despite programs mandating and expanding universal pre-K, "proficiency based" learning, and spending \$31 million to incent school districts to consolidate in order to, no joke, save money. If nothing dramatically different is done in the next few weeks, we are looking at a 9 percent property tax increase.

Vermont has implemented many wealth redistribution programs to ostensibly help the poor. We have the most progressive income tax in the nation as well as the most progressive property tax system. Vermont spends more money per capita than all but just five other states. A single-parent family of three in Vermont receives Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) that is 51 percent higher than the national average. Roughly 35 percent of Vermonters receive some form of Medicaid. Our \$10.50 state minimum wage is already in the top five highest in the country, and a 2013 study by the Cato Institute calculated a typical welfare benefit package family was worth \$37,705, or the equivalent of a pre-tax wage of \$42,350. This puts us in the top 10 "most generous" suppliers of welfare.

But despite all this, Vermont was the only state in 2016 to see a rise in the number of citizens living in poverty, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. According to the Vermont Foodbank, 83,630 Vermonters are "food insecure," including 24,530 children. The Public Assets Institute recently reported, "Income inequality is getting worse — most Vermonters are not sharing in economic growth."

Vermont is a wonderful place to live. But despite everything our state has to offer in terms of scenic landscapes, clean air, healthy and safe surroundings, etc., ours is one of only three states since 2010 to have actually lost population.

What is happening that fewer people want to live in the greatest place there is to live?

Political historian Michael Barone most know, as the author of “The Almanac of American Politics,” recently explained that this “can be chalked up to Woodstock-era migrants — Bernie Sanders, Howard Dean. They’ve liberalized the state’s culture and politics, so with the state’s high taxes and stringent environmental bans, no one is following.”

Indeed, beyond the direct government forays into our paychecks, Green Mountain Power customers will see a 5 percent rate increase due to progressive, renewable energy policies, and the Green Mountain Care Board approved a 9 percent increase for Blue Cross Blue Shield health insurance, no thanks to a phalanx of progressive-minded health care laws — including the one that created the same Green Mountain Care Board supposedly to rein in costs!

So given the true challenges facing our state, it is a bit frustrating to see the Legislature immediately take up, of all things, the legalization of marijuana, passing the bill before even reading the study they ordered last year. After that, it’s more items off the same menu of failed ideas. House and Senate leaders proclaimed their priorities will be to increase our already high minimum wage to \$15 an hour, and to pass a government-run, government-mandated paid family leave insurance program that is so attractive on its own merits that proponents admit if people weren’t forced to participate, no one would buy it.

Does anybody really think these measures are going to solve any of the serious problems facing Vermont? Rather than waste time trying to determine which next big government bell or whistle is the one that will finally cause the population tide to rise, why not figure out what it is you’re already doing to scare people off. Then stop. If we want to turn our state around, that means by definition we will actually have to change direction.