

No on Measure 103: It's not about your groceries.

In this edition of Street Roots, we dived into the pea soup of claims and accusations surrounding Measure 103, a proposal to change Oregon's constitution to prohibit any state or local government from enacting a tax, fee or other assessment on any transaction for the sale, purchase, distribution, or transfer of "groceries," or for the privilege of selling

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or distributing "groceries."

That makes it sound like it's about you, right? You and some imminent threat to your weekly grocery bill? All the pro-measure rhetoric focuses on the threat to shoppers, particularly the low-income households and people on fixed incomes. It's all about protecting your food and beverages, right?

But it's not about you. Not at all. It's about corporations using one of their favorite tactics – changing our state constitution – and shielding themselves from our own legislative process and local representation. If it stopped at protecting groceries, it would be another consideration altogether, and one we might support (if the threat was even remotely real).

But here is the real meat of the measure:

"The prohibited taxes and fees include any sales tax, gross receipts tax, commercial activity tax, value-added tax, excise tax or privilege tax and any change in the corporate minimum tax, to the extent that the corporate minimum tax is imposed on Oregon sales of groceries," according to the Secretary of State's office summary.

Look past the fallacy of a grocery tax and you see a corporate tax carve-out for the grocery industry, to be calcified in our state constitution, making some tax laws extremely difficult – nigh on impossible – to modify.

As a retroactive measure, it could repeal part of the provider tax voters approved in January for Medicaid funding. As a result, the Oregon Nurses Association says the measure would hurt low-income families, children and seniors.

It would create tax exemptions for trucking companies that contribute to Oregon's air pollution, while allowing taxes on family

essentials including diapers, medicine, toilet paper and feminine hygiene products. After studying the measure, the City Club of Portland concluded that the measure has the "potential to create significant administrative and legal problems in the state by inserting a tax loophole directly into the Oregon constitution ... The state constitution does not need to be changed to protect groceries or grocers."

On top of what is known about the measure are the questions that still remain. Our reporting found there were too many unknowns on just how this will play out in our tax laws – questions that will likely be hashed out in courtrooms for years to come if this measure is passed. Its long-term implications remain unknown – but are nonetheless virtually permanent.

The big money behind the campaign isn't from Oregonians, but rather from Washington State based Costco, Idaho-based Albertsons Safeway and Ohio-based Kroger.

Standing in opposition to the measure is a long list of Oregon businesses, farmers, labor unions, social service groups, teacher associations, senior citizen and veterans organizations, and many more. And yet the proponents of this measure are telling voters that it's powerful special interest groups that have been trying to tax your groceries. There have been several past efforts to alter and increase taxes paid by corporations – including these mega-grocers – and state and local governments should have that right and obligation. To call that a tax on groceries is a deception.

The surest way corporations can convince people to vote against their best interests is to make them think they have something to fear. We do, but not in the way these retailers want us to believe.

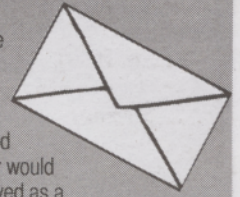
This vote isn't about whether or not to tax groceries – nobody thinks taxing food makes sense, and Oregon has a long history of stopping any sales tax effort in its tracks. This is a vote about whether a specific, global industry deserves a constitutional exemption from Oregonians on taxes that support our health care, education, environment, and social services.

The answer is resounding no.



Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Executive Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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