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Tax Reform: as Important as it is Unentertaining

by Leslie Frane, SEIU Local 503, OPEU Executive Director



Not even Woody Allen can make tax reform seem entertaining.

But unless we change Oregon's tax structure, our future will include one budget crisis after another. We will face constant attacks on our wages and benefits and on the services we provide.

When I talk with members about taxes, I frequently hear the following questions:

▶ **Aren't our taxes high already?**

If you look only at income tax, our taxes seem high. But if you look at total tax burden, including sales and property taxes, Oregonians pay less in state and local taxes than residents of thirty-six other states.

▶ **Why not just raise taxes on corporations and wealthy people?**

The share of taxes paid by businesses and rich people has dropped dramatically over the last decade. So it's reasonable to expect the most prosperous of Oregonians to pay the lion's share of any tax increases. But we also need to acknowledge political reality. In addition to our preferred solutions, we may

need to consider some changes we aren't crazy about in order to build enough support for us to prevail.

▶ **So what's the solution?**

We don't know yet. Part of the problem is finding a solution that is both fair and politically viable. SEIU, our international union, has just committed \$200,000 in New Strength and Unity funds to help us build the necessary coalitions here in Oregon to find and build support for tax solutions. We will consider both legislative and initiative-based approaches.

▶ **What can individual union members do?**

Vote against ballot measures that would further erode our tax base. And make sure you talk with our friends and family about tax reform.

No one likes the idea of paying more taxes. But most Oregonians will accept tax increases if they understand that the only alternative is the ongoing deterioration of services they need. We need to help people make the connection between tax reform and quality public services. The subject may be boring, but it is critically important for our future.