

INSIGHT & OPINION

TABOR troubles Less is not more when it comes to investing in America

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Paul Gessing's "Less is More" commentary (Insight & Opinion, Oct. 31) might have made an interesting argument for the so-called taxpayer bill of rights (also known as TABOR), but only if he had built his case on less selective and questionable data.

As with so many TABOR supporters, he attempts to pin any and all economic growth on the straight-jacket approach to spending that is TABOR. But he's quite wrong.

For background, the people of Colorado voted in enact TABOR in 1992. TABOR puts strict limitations on how much money Colorado's state and municipal governments can collect in taxes. The less money collected, the less money the state can spend on maintaining infrastructure and social programs.

Colorado did, indeed, see substantial economic growth during the 1990s. So did pretty much every state, as that decade was marked by a vibrant economy.

Colorado also saw a boom in population in the '90s, as well as significant growth in the telecommunications sector. None of Colorado's economic success in the '90s can be directly related to TABOR. But Colorado's current economic woes can be.

One of the many problems with TABOR is that it utterly fails during an economic recession. Because each year's allowable revenue levels are tied to the year before, once revenues go down — as they did after the dot-com bust — they cannot be restored to pre-recession levels.

Worse yet, it allows for no "rainy day" funds. As a result, Coloradans have watched their roads and highways fall

TODAY'S BYLINE

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into disrepair, their university professors flee the state in search of better salaries, tuition skyrocket, and fewer and fewer children receive the vaccinations they need to keep themselves — and their classmates — healthy.

Colorado's child poverty rate rose an alarming 50 percent between 2000 and 2004 — far outpacing the national average, according to the Annie C. Casey Foundation's Kids Count data book. The state's overall national rank dropped from 20th to 25th in that same time period.

Colorado now ranks dead last both in the percentage of low-income children who have health insurance and who receive the full suite of childhood vaccines. Those are hardly statistics to brag about.

While Gessing plays down the implications of last year's voter approval of a five-year moratorium on TABOR, he neglects to mention that Colorado's Republican governor, Bill Owen, fought for that very measure. Nor does he mention that Colorado's formerly Republican-led General Assembly is now led by Democrats.

Fiscal conservatives are careful to overlook the most important fact when they talk about taxes — that taxes represent an investment in America.

Taxes build and maintain our infrastructure, they pay for programs that keep our communities safe, they guarantee that everyone will have the opportunity to learn to read and write — something the framers of our Constitution knew was essential in order for a democ-

cracy to function. It's easy, when living in a consumer paradise, to forget how much we Americans take for granted. All of the tax rebates and refunds possible would not provide the average American with enough money to pave their own roads, install and power their own street and traffic lights, pump their own water, pay for continuous trash collection, build airports and sports stadiums and arrest, prosecute and lock up dangerous criminals.

Without the kind of investment our parents and grandparents made in America's infrastructure, this country would look like any other undeveloped nation. We owe it to them — and to our children — not to let that infrastructure crumble and fall.

Investment also spurs economic growth. Which sector that investment comes from does not matter. But where it is invested does. When investment is made primarily in the country's wealthiest people, as with the recent tax cuts, they benefit primarily the wealthy. When investment is made on a broader scale, the benefits are broad. When everyone has a bright future, the country has a bright future.

But if we fail to invest in our children by not providing them with quality education and health care, our nation's future is bleak. America cannot continue to be an economic powerhouse with an undereducated and unhealthy workforce.

What makes America great is our willingness to invest in one another. This investment is a covenant of mutual responsibility — the government is responsible to its people, the people to their government and all of us to one another.

"Smaller government" is just a way of saying "less responsibility."