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Ballot Measure on Cancer a Symptom of Dysfunctional State

OP-ED By TERESA CASAZZA Monday, December 12, 2011

Increasing funding for cancer research is a laudable goal. We all have been touched by this terrible disease, and must continue working for a cure. But cancer research is too important to be left in the hands of an unchecked bureaucracy created by a career politician, run by unelected political appointees and with no accountability for how it spends our tax dollars. Yet that is exactly what is being proposed in a measure on the June ballot that seeks to raise taxes by nearly \$1 billion a year.

The California Cancer Research Act would spend that money to create another government bureaucracy – with additional salary, pension and health care costs. Our state has more than \$200 billion of debt, and can't afford to pay for critical existing programs like education and health care. Now is not the time for a new spending program.

This is exactly the kind of ballot-box budgeting that has contributed to California's ongoing fiscal problems by mandating spending on new programs without reining in runaway state spending, controlling waste or inefficiencies in government, or paying down the deficit. This new proposal would direct how tax dollars can be spent, taking away the ability of the Legislature, governor or voters to respond to changing fiscal problems. And, as with other ballot-box-funding mechanisms, the Legislature would not be able to touch the money, despite other needs in the state.

To make matters worse, this flawed measure would create an internal administrative board that includes political appointees who are accountable to no one. In fact, the initiative cannot be altered for 15 years – not even to address waste or abuse.

We've seen firsthand what happens without proper oversight of, and checks and balances on how taxpayer dollars are spent on government programs. Just recently, the Los Angeles Times reported that an independent audit of First 5 LA, a local agency created as a result of a past initiative, revealed a "lack of transparency, accountability and competitive bidding." The problems are bad enough that the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors has "signaled its intent to take greater control of First 5 LA," one of many local agencies created to collect and disperse tobacco tax funds increased under the First 5 initiative approved in 1998.

The audit of L.A.'s First 5 agency concluded that "the agency was overstaffed while underspending on programs for children" – in other words, it is using our tax dollars to help its employees rather than children, as intended by the voters.

Repeating mistakes

The CCRA would simply repeat the mistakes of such ballot-box measures. Not only would it create another unaccountable bureaucracy with six political appointees, it would exempt its CEO from normal hiring and salary requirements, meaning money that voters may think is going to research may actually go toward yet another huge salary for a public employee. Consider that the executive director of First 5 LA, who was forced to resign in the wake of the withering audit, will receive an expensive severance

package that includes a one-time payment of her annual salary, health benefits and vacation time that's expected to exceed \$240,000.

First 5 LA offers a cautionary tale for voters: Regardless of the motivations behind the CCRA initiative, it is flawed and poorly drafted. Instead of creating fail-safes to ensure that any tax money is spent on a cure, this initiative creates an unchecked bureaucracy, and the potential for more waste, fraud and abuse of our tax dollars. We cannot afford to let something so important fall into a bureaucratic quagmire, especially one so rife with potential abuse.

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