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New Taxes Proposed for State's Residents

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Unpleasant though the specter of tax-day April 15 is, Californians ought to relish the moment. They'll never have it this good again.

That's because there are roughly 117 tax- or fee-hike proposals now circulating in Sacramento. The California Taxpayers Association, which has done yeoman's work documenting them all on its Web site: www.caltax.org, estimated the total price tag for California consumers could reach as high as \$28 billion.

And no matter how hard you try, there's no escaping it.

Let's begin with fuel taxes -- as though the price at the pump weren't already high enough.

Before your gas ever makes it to the local station, Assemblyman Manny Diaz, D-San Jose, wants to drive up the cost with a \$1 tax on every barrel of oil received at a California refinery. Sen. Nell Soto, D-Ontario, wants to follow that up with a 30 cent surcharge on every barrel the refineries convert to transportation fuel. And to make sure the pinch is felt at the pump, Sen. Tom Torlakson, D-Concord, has proposed increasing the consumer gas tax by 3.5 cents a gallon.

What's a driver to do?

Well, you could sell that old, fuel-inefficient clunker and buy something with better gas-mileage, but the state would get you there, too. A new car will carry a higher value, and with Gov. Gray Davis and state Controller Steve Westly conspiring to triple the state car tax next year, upgrading could be pricey.

Barring that, you could try an electric car, except that the price of power may go up, thanks to Assemblyman Juan Vargas. The Chula Vista Democrat wants to tack a fee onto every kilowatt hour of electricity imported into the state.

And don't think you can dodge higher energy prices by buying low-wattage fluorescent lamps. The Assembly is considering slapping a five-cent tax on those, too.

Expect everything to get more expensive -- literally -- as Davis is pushing for a 1 percentage point increase in the state sales tax, which translates to about a 12 percent hike in the overall rate.

There's no getting out of that one, either.

Sure, you could try buying items out of state, either online or through mail-order catalogs, but that loophole won't be around long. Sen. Debra Bowen, D-Redondo Beach, has proposed legislation to extend the long taxing arm of the state all the way into cyberspace.

So, fine, you won't buy anything; you'll put all your money in the bank. They've got you there, too. State Treasurer Phil Angelides has suggested a new tax for credit unions.

If you really want to avoid paying new taxes, you and your money would be better off staying at home,

but even that could get expensive.

What if you get lonely and want to call someone? Davis' budget plan calls for raising the telephone tax.

How about one of life's great free pleasures, the library book? Sorry, they're going after those, too, with plans to implement user fees at public libraries.

And if you want to read that book while cozying up to a nice, warm fire, prepare to pay a one-cent-per-board-foot tax on wood products, courtesy of Sen. Sheila Kuehl, D-Los Angeles.

The state's wannabe tax-hikers don't discriminate between the young and the old. They're going after babies and seniors alike -- with a diaper tax proposed by Oakland Democrat Don Perata. Working parents would also have to pay more for child care, if Davis succeeds in hiking the annual fees paid by licensed providers. Even long-term health facilities, veterans' and nursing homes are all possible taxing targets.

Clearly the only solution for the beleaguered California taxpayer is to get a good accountant -- maybe a lawyer, too -- and let the experts find the loopholes. The only problem is that the state treasurer has also recommended applying the sales tax to professional services. Not to be outdone, the state legislative analyst has suggested requiring all California tax practitioners to pay an annual fee to Sacramento.

You could, of course, just start working harder and earn enough money to pay all the extra taxes that state leaders would like to send your way, but industriousness also carries its costs. Davis has urged raising income-tax rates for the state's highest earners, and Assemblywoman Jackie Goldberg, D-Los Angeles, has suggested scrapping their home mortgage interest deductions.

It's enough to drive you to drink, except that Sen. Gloria Romero, D-Rosemead, is advocating a 5-cent tax on every glass of wine and beer sold in the state.

Fine, then how about a soft drink?

Well, legislators have talked about taxing soda, too.

Not even bottled water is safe. Sen. Byron Sher, D-San Jose, has suggested sticking an unspecified tax on water-bottling plants, vending machines, haulers, retail providers and distributors.

So you might just want to pass up on that drink and light up a smoke instead -- only you'll probably have to pay the \$1.10 per-pack cigarette-tax increase that's included in the governor's budget plan.

If all these tax hikes drive you mad, seek professional help. While you're there, you can remind your psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker or marriage counselor that he or she may soon have to pay a \$5 license-renewal fee, the brainchild of Assemblyman Leeland Yee, D-San Francisco.

Just don't shoot yourself. If Assemblyman Mark Ridley-Thomas, D-Los Angeles, and Sen. Paul Koretz, D-West Hollywood, get their state bullet tax, you'll have to pay Sacramento a dime for the privilege. Chris Weinkopf is an editorial writer and columnist for the Daily News. Write to him by e-mail atchrisk.weinkopf@dailynews.com.