

Flip chart information from Civil Discussion Workshop
January 2010

On January 16 the LWV of Bellingham/Whatcom County sponsored an interactive workshop entitled 'How to Have a Civil Discussion in Uncivil Times'. Participants were able to learn techniques to help them have more meaningful dialogs about current issues. Participants worked in small groups to develop open ended questions about our tax structure. Notes from the discussions provided our league leaders with questions our members and our community have about the tax system, these questions will guide us as we move forward exploring the local tax structure.

Below, are the questions we have about the tax system at the local and state level.

Information needed about our current tax structure (Content)

1. What are the various taxes collected by the state & local governments?
2. How does Washington's tax system compare to those of other states?
3. How much does each tax revenue source contribute to the total budget?
4. What are the long range implications to cuts being made?
5. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current tax system?
6. Why doesn't Washington State have an income tax?
7. Who decides how to adjust the budget and raise taxes?
8. What are the impacts of the federal government taking away dollars? (i.e.. more money is collected in federal taxes than the state receives in benefits)
9. What is the meant by a flat tax (as opposed to a graduated income tax)?
10. What are local levies?
11. How do we choose to exempt particular items from sales tax?
12. What could be raised by adding other services to the sales tax base?
13. What other types of taxes have not been considered?
14. How should taxes be partitioned? (balance of income from various taxes)
15. How does geographic location impact the fairness of your taxes?
16. How much in additional funds would a tax reform proposal generate?
17. What are the problems with privatization? (assuming that it's an alternative to government paying for services)

Open ended value driven questions:

1. Why not have an income tax?
2. Talking about taxes generates resistance in some. Why is this?
3. What are our priorities as a community and how should we pay for them?
4. How would it work if each of us could check off what our taxes went for?
5. How do you feel about special interests' influence on funding?
6. What are your views on the B & O tax?
7. Do you think the tax system is regressive or progressive? Why?
8. What do you think you should get for your taxes?
9. In what ways is a sales tax valuable? In what ways is it not?
10. How broad should a sin/luxury sales tax be?
11. How does a lack of state income tax affect our environment? (lack of state protection or investment in certain programs)
12. What is meant by fairness in a system? fair to whom, business people, individuals, etc?
13. How can we measure fairness?
14. What are the programs/services we are unwilling to compromise?
15. What is the best way of funding our basic services?
16. A tax system should be transparent to all.

17. What are the communities' needs?
18. How do we perceive value in the services received for our taxes?

Open ended procedural questions - Why is it this way?

1. Why can't we get tax reform?
2. What do you think the community would do with no tax income (benefits from taxation)?
3. How would it look if we didn't have a government for a day?
4. Should the initiative system be changed? (also value driven)
5. How do we close loopholes to prevent people taking unfair advantage?
6. How should we decide on taxes? (also value driven)
7. How could giving service be an alternative to giving money?
8. If the B & O tax was meant to be temporary, why has it hung on so long?

Procedural questions/statements about how League & citizens can work on tax issue:

1. Give voice to the people who don't vote.
2. Inform your representatives (about your opinion).
3. Should we possibly reinstate the Gates Commission?
4. What can we do to raise the interest & awareness in tax structure & policy?
5. How can we acquire more knowledge about the current state tax system?
6. How can the LWV promote useful discussion & understanding of the tax system?
7. Where do we get the accurate information about our taxes?
8. How will an increase in sales tax help us right now?
9. How would a new system be implemented?
10. How would we influence the legislature?
11. How can the League go about informing the public and raising awareness?
12. We need to appeal to values by showing the consequences of our current policies.
13. League can share the Gates report findings and other previous reports/
14. We need more information and outside input.
15. Need to approach the issue of fairness as neutrally as possible

Probing follow up questions for a dialog:

1. Why would you want to change the tax structure/
2. What specifically would be a good change?
3. What would be your plan of action or where would you start?
4. How would a flat tax bridge the gap between rich & poor?
5. What do you see as the problems with our current tax system?
6. What would be the consequences of not doing anything?

Themes: - Big Picture Questions

What are our priorities as a community and what should the government provide?

First we agree that government must provide basic services. What is basic though?

Second, How do we resolve our different priorities?

Third, How do we fund our priorities in an equitable manner? How do we agree on what's equitable.

How can we make the tax system more equitable and at the same time address the budget issues?

What are our funding priorities?