

10. How Can You Get Involved?

Wait! Wait! Don't just throw this guide in the trash. At this point, you're probably overwhelmed with numbers, percentages, charts, graphs, and so forth, and wondering what in the world you can do with your new knowledge. Well, here are five easy ways you can become involved in how government raises and spends your money!

You can:

1. Share this guide with friends and family.

This will help others, about whom you care, to understand why government does what it does. This will help them to understand the sometimes-daunting lingo that you read in your local newspapers about taxes and budgets. Help them not to feel funny when they don't know about "appropriations" or "excise taxes."

2. Take a look at the next budget proposal from your local school district, the city, county, or the state. See what the superintendent, town manager, or governor plans to do with *your* money. Consider these questions:

- Did he or she fully explain—so you fully understand—why an increase or a decrease in your taxes is being recommended?
- Do you agree or disagree with their priorities—priorities like a new public health clinic, hiring more police officers, postponing that new park, cutting or raising your property taxes, or spending more money on child day care or on counseling for prison inmates?

3. Tell someone what you think. Once you've studied a budget proposal, tell someone what you think. Elected officials get tired of hearing from the usual suspects like lobbyists, campaign contributors, or agency heads who have a vested interest in more funding. They want to hear from someone who's asked to help pay the bill.

...AND JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT YOU HAD SEEN ALL THE NUMBERS, PERCENTAGES, CHARTS, AND GRAPHS YOU COULD POSSIBLY STAND...

Fold out the inside back cover for Appendix A, Summary of General Fund Appropriations, (Session Law 2003-284, as enacted), Fiscal Years 2003–05, 2003 Legislative Session.

- **Attend a public hearing and speak up!**

And here's a special tip: Elected officials are much more swayed by the carefully-reasoned but forceful argument presented clearly, cleanly—without rancor or anger. Any good politician can dismiss a rabble-rousing loudmouth as "...full of sound and fury...signifying nothing..." Your calm, direct, forceful presentation will travel miles farther.

- **Write a letter to your representatives and senators at the legislature.** Names and addresses are easily obtained, online [www.ncleg.net], or from a call to the Legislative Services Office at the General Assembly [919 733 7044].

- **Maybe, even write a letter to the local newspaper.** You'll be surprised how much they appreciate your comments.

4. Attend a debate between candidates for public office. Ask them a question about the budget.

- Do they seem to know what they're talking about? If they want to cut taxes, do they also tell you *where* they will cut spending? If they want to pay for something new, like reducing class sizes, do they tell you *how* they will pay for it? After reading this guide, you can't be fooled because you know there are at least two sides to the fiscal equation.

5. The most important thing you can do with any information, is share it with a younger generation. Stoplights, the water from the tap, someone paying for groceries with food stamps, hearing the dump truck pick up the trash, a children's reading group at the local library, keeping the animals at the zoo healthy and happy, taking meals to home-bound seniors—these are all things that government can do because it collects taxes. When kids see that you are struggling to calculate your taxes in April, and when they see that the receipt for their shoes shows an extra few dollars, tell them why. If you don't, who will?

Here's a final bit of wisdom we've discovered: *Information is only powerful if you use it for some purpose beyond yourself.* Stay informed, let others know what you think and then, by example, teach others, especially younger generations, what it means to be an active citizen and to hold government accountable.