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Opinion

Editorial: Lawmakers, don't tax our food to fix the budget

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As for tax hikes, how about what out-of-state corporations aren't paying?

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When legislators convene Jan. 19, they have a big job ahead of them to fix the state's deficit, which is \$600 million at last count. We envision them making a combination of tax hikes and spending cuts as Gov. Bill Richardson is proposing this week.

Richardson's spending plan has a \$200 million hike in taxes although he doesn't specify where those increases would take place. He also says it would be temporary. But one idea that's being mentioned — reinstating the food tax — should be off the table. New Mexico and many other states once had a full tax on groceries.

Now only two, Alabama and Mississippi, have such a tax. Our state imposed a tax on food in 1933 during the Great Depression as a temporary and emergency measure, but we know how those things can work.

Temporary and emergency ended 72 years later in 2005 when the state repealed the food tax and instead raised the gross receipts taxes — New Mexico's sales tax — on non-food items by a half percent to cover the loss in revenue.

Yes, legislators have tough decisions to make during this 30-day session. But reinstating the food tax would be a terrible idea. Consider who would be hurt most by such a tax: The state's low- and middle-income workers who spend a big chunk of their take-home pay to feed their families and themselves.

While the state is clearly struggling during this weak economy, so are most people who live here. People have lost their jobs or, in the case of the self-employed who are not counted in unemployment stats, lost income.

And, there are those who do the Taos Shuffle of holding down two or three part-time jobs to make ends meet. Should we ask them to pay more for groceries? Absolutely not. Our local legislators, Sen. Carlos Cisneros and Rep. Roberto "Bobby" Gonzales, both Democrats, agree as well.

"I'm not in favor of a food tax. It will just add more misery to an already bad situation and we can't squeeze people any more," Cisneros said.

So, what should the state squeeze instead? Cuts were made at the state level during this fall's special session, but then again, they were likely the easiest ones to make. Now, it's time for close scrutiny and sacrifice.

As for tax hikes, how about what out-of-state corporations aren't paying? Yes, lawmakers have to fix the budget, but let's leave the groceries people buy out of the equation.