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OUR VIEW

Legislators leave with work undone

It'd be nice to dismiss them as blithe spirits, those 112 state legislators who adjourned their special session leaving lots of unresolved budget questions. And since a budget was the one thing they were supposed to achieve during the January-February regular session — but failed to — then skipped out of the Roundhouse Thursday leaving a half-baked budget at best, their fellow New Mexicans might be forgiven for seeing them as a bunch of well-meaning procrastinators.

But local-government leaders, among others, might better characterize them as cowards — who reinstated some of the sales tax on food, at the same time ordering municipalities and counties to impose that tax. It's a tax that hurts worst at the lower-income levels — which is why the Legislature eliminated it five years ago.

But this year, faced with declining revenue, and reluctant to restore income-tax rates they'd grandly reduced on behalf of the rich, they pounced on the poor. All New Mexicans would have to pay the 2 percent gross-receipts tax on food — but the burden would be heaviest on the working poor.

"Would be?" Yes — because Gov. Bill Richardson has a chance to issue a line-item veto against that part of the budget bill.

It wasn't supposed to work out that way: Were it only a budget measure, he would have to approve it or veto it wholesale. But legislative leaders, feeling sheepish about the food-tax return, also approved \$5 million in income-tax rebates for those low-income folks willing and able to file for it. And since that's an appropriation of money, the governor now may feel free to whack the budget bill's more offensive items.

The food tax matches that description — and the governor should take his knife to it.

B-b-but that would cost the state \$60 million in revenue, lead lawmakers might moan — and we'd have to hold another special session to find fresh sources of money.

There are many such sources — a liquor tax and a measure making out-of-state "big-box" stores pay fair shares of corporate income tax would produce more than \$60 million. But lobbyists for both interests had their way with key senators and representatives, leaving them nowhere to look but to the New Mexican masses for taxes they blatantly claimed were "spreading the pain," as the 1/8-cent sales-tax boost also does.

Since the budget they cobbled together in four days barely begins to cope with financial reality, they're sure to have to come back between now and next January's regular session. When new revenue projections come out after the end of this month, they might have a better idea how much they can count on in the fiscal year that starts in July.

Chances are, they'll have to make deeper spending cuts than they made this week — and that they'll have to find new revenue to boot.

The governor should veto the food tax. He'd be doing a favor to our state representatives, all of whose 70 seats are up for re-election this year. Let 'em return to Santa Fe — to their senses, too — and impose some less-unpopular taxes.