



Taxation is Ruination — and a Warning for Montana

By Tracy Sharpe

Taxation is supposed to be about revenue — not ruination. The overhaul of Montana’s tax system by the 69th Legislature threatens the foundation of our communities and could force Montanans to abandon their properties to the ultra-rich.

Though advertised as relief, these reforms create an unstable, unpredictable landscape: property taxes drop for select homeowners, but increase sharply for small businesses, landlords, and anyone excluded from narrow eligibility brackets. Through tax policy, the state government isn’t merely raising revenue to fund its obligations; it is picking winners and losers.

I have constituents, now retired and past their best earning years, who have spent their lives in Montana and are now unexpectedly facing taxes so steep (78%, 90% and 100% increases) they must consider abandoning their Montana dream to sell to those for whom the increase is pocket change. All of this is attributable to the greedy hand of government. The people might lose, but the government never goes without.

Some inherited tiny lake-front properties (shacks in some cases) that have been in the family for generations. Others have elderly parents they are carrying for in the house next door and thus, on paper, have two residences. Others have the retirement home they planned to live out the rest of their years in that they bought and paid for long ago, but it unexpectedly jumped in value in recent years. These citizens are not seeing reasonable tax increases they can manage; they’re instead being driven out of their homes by their own government.

Conrad Republican Rep. Llew Jones was the architect of the massive property tax shift passed in the Legislature and signed by Gov. Gianforte. “Every part of this bill has been vetted,” Jones confidently stated in the Senate Bill 542 conference committee on April 29. Rep. Jones along with a handful of others published their bipartisan “mission accomplished” editorial on May 8, proudly asserting that they had “answered the call” to provide “real, permanent property tax relief.”



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They specifically highlighted that Senate Bill 542 and House Bill 231 will lower property taxes paid by 130,000 renters. Then the mills were determined and the actual property tax bills arrived. Even supportive legislators and media were alarmed. “Montana renters could foot the bill for a property tax blunder” blared the Missoulian headline. Turns out, rent is going way up instead of down in Missoula and other cities because of this legislation. Apartment buildings are staring down 40% or higher property tax increases and landlords will pass this on in the form of higher rent.

Promised relief for renters turned into a new burden, and many experts warn the pain won’t subside even if rates dip next year. Billings Democratic Sen. Emma Kerr-Carpenter and Missoula landlord Nate Tollefson state that rents are not going to go back down even if the property taxes do.

Even Democrat legislator Rep. Mark Thane stated that we’re now into a “year of pain” for renters. And what does pain look like? It’s a rent payment that has increased so much due to taxation that you do not have the money to pay it. Then what?

One solution is to call for a special session to fix this disaster. Let those who did get a tax break keep it, but return all the others including those with two homes to the same tax they had last year. The difference in revenue would then come out of the hide of the state government. Yes, that would mean many pet project programs to include some I favor would not be funded. So be it.

When it comes to the people or the government, the people must always come out on top. Then, perhaps, we could entertain a much wider spectrum of possible tax solutions in the 2027 session. What is not an acceptable outcome is to drive Montanans out of their homes through errant and destructive tax policy. Shame on the state government and Legislature for putting its wants above the needs of the citizens it is supposed to serve and represent. For Montana to thrive, tax policy must offer stability, prioritize community over government expansion, and guarantee that it’s always the people who come first. That’s a mission that has not been accomplished. 🇺🇸