

Zombies, Budgets and Arts Education

Zombies, Brains and the FY 15 Budget

Rhode Island has officially entered the race to the bottom. The new Speaker of the House chanted the phrase “jobs and the economy” the way a staggering zombie bellows the word “brains.” And, much like the dreaded infectious bite of the undead, the chant became a chorus of mindless followers, without the capacity for concern of implementing any real change. There is no mistaking the fact that Rhode Island is encountering a stagnant recovery as compared to other states. However, this year’s budget proposal made no effort to treat the cause of the state’s fiscal doldrums. Rather, like the doctor who graduates last in his class receives the same license to practice medicine as the doctor who graduated first, the budget architects waited until the last minute to conduct a diagnosis and treated only the symptoms.

The overall problem with the approach to reviving economic life in Rhode Island’s economy is the voodoo economic theory that has been comatose since the end of the Reagan administration. Rewarding the wealthy with more money by nickel and diming the middle class until they become the working poor does not grow a thriving economy. Instead, it hamstring the majority from rising from a crawl to a walk, and then allowing them to run. Like every good myth or fable, there are a few instances of truth to the tale of the poor kid who, through hard work and dedication, became a millionaire. But there are infinitely more instances of the poor kid who gets an underfunded public education, gets her hours cut back on her big box store retail job and becomes evicted from her apartment.

The FY 15 budget’s approach is to continue the moratorium on schoolhouse construction funding in favor of an increase in the inheritance tax threshold. So public schools can stay cold, wet and dangerous while retired millionaires aren’t tempted to move out of state. Tax rates on the wealthiest earners remain at low levels, while property taxes continue to rise. State employees, who have been determined by the administration to be undercompensated as compared to both private sector counterparts and other states around the nation, are granted the contractual raises they haven’t seen in almost four years, but each state department must find the money for the raises in each departmental budget respectively. The state employs over 13,000 Rhode Islanders. How many other employers can boast that?

Jobs and the economy. One budget article prohibits cities, towns and municipalities from raising the minimum wage higher than the minimum wage set by the state. The budget, to my understanding, is meant as a statute of appropriations of general revenue, restricted receipt, and any federal and grant funding as determined by the electorate of the state of Rhode Island. How does a superseding restriction on the minimum wage have anything to do with the appropriation of state-controlled funding? Because jobs and the economy.

Other states that have experienced true economic recovery have invested in their middle class. By expanding the middle class through investments in education and health, these states have been able to grow their way out of economic illness, rather than tax their way out. Furthermore, these states, such as Massachusetts and Connecticut, have retained and attracted actual job creators by making the state an attractive location to live. By investing in infrastructure, education, health and overall quality of life, a pool of talent is fostered and drawn to the area and all boats rise with the tide.

But Rhode Island's leadership has adopted the alternative "quick fix" solution, which is to dangle a carrot on a stick and hope the burros of industry will chase. By blaming big government for waste and taking any money swept up after chipping away at public services (e.g., state and municipal retirement and health care, public schools, police, fire, emergency services, roads, bridges) and offering them as tax breaks and corporate incentives, they effectively pin a clearance sign on the state. The bright orange sticker has a price tag that aims to be lower than that of other states and that price is followed by "or best offer." Thus, the Rhode Island FY 15 budget competes in the race to the bottom for more bad jobs and less regulation, and sacrifices overall quality of life for better rankings on lists created by studies funded by organizations like the American Legislative Exchange Council and the Heritage Foundation. For the record, Rhode Island boasts the second lowest levels of government employment per capita in the country.

Unfortunately, the new speaker has (to his credit) proven himself to be a surprisingly masterful politician and his leadership does not appear to be going anywhere in the foreseeable future. Let us hope, for the sake of Rhode Island's long-term economic future, Mr. Speaker considers adding just a single word to his chant so it becomes "good jobs and the economy." That single word will make all the difference in the state.

Investing in Arts Education Earns Creative Capital

Rhode Island has a problem. Despite its reputation as a creative hub and an arts haven, it has lost its way in the very place where such excellence is fostered: schools. Education has become so competitively focused on math and science that it lost its momentum investing in creativity.

Rhode Island prides itself on being home to a world-class design school, a fantastic culinary institute and a jewel of performing arts venues. But the public education system is driven by tests focused primarily on quantitative learning. This is in no way meant to devalue the maths and sciences. But what separates the innovative from the derivative and uninspired is the fostering of creative learning.

I was recently admitted to law school. I work in a public agency that requires me to provide customer service and perform cognitive arithmetic. I also work as a political operative, conducting research and analyzing policy in order to try and sway political opinion at the polls and implement change at a legislative level. I have a degree in theater studies with a minor in English. I have read everything from Aeschylus to Shakespeare to Kushner and have a deep understanding of the human spirit, as well as a fearlessness to improvise publicly. Do I wish I was a little better with double-entry bookkeeping? Sure. But what I may lack in arithmetic expertise, I make up for in my ability to improvise and think around corners. This will help me in law school and beyond.

This is what Rhode Island needs more of in schools. By emphasizing the arts and humanities as much as the maths and sciences, the term "well-rounded student" can be resurrected and Rhode Island can begin depositing creative capital into its innovation talent bank.