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Hamilton County must look for long-term budget solutions, not just Band-Aids

By Greg Hartmann

Government does one thing all too well. It spends every dime it gets.

Hamilton County government is experiencing the same financial difficulties that many households are. The county faces a mid-year \$12 million shortfall in our 2008 budget because our economy has weakened and we have spent our rainy day fund.

As a solution, an Enquirer editorial July 21 suggested that "restricted funds" of county departments should be used to alleviate the current budget shortfall. Doing this would be fiscally irresponsible but consistent with the typical government reaction. Government wants to take the easy way out and spend money legally reserved for specific purposes in order to avoid making tough decisions now.

This is similar to the problems we face at the federal level with the Social Security Trust Fund. The federal government has selfishly amassed a stack of IOUs by freely spending these dollars on pet projects with no plan to replace this money and fulfill the commitment made to America's seniors.

Restricted funds are made up of differing percentages of collected fees, fines and court costs. By state law we re-invest those dollars back into our offices. In my office, for example, the County General Fund does not fully fund our entire operating budget. The burden on the taxpayer is lessened by fee collections from those who use court services.

In particular, The Enquirer listed my Clerk of Courts Automation Fund as a potential budget Band-Aid. By state law, this fund may only be used to pay for and service the technological infrastructure within the Clerk of Courts office and the Hamilton County Courts. We only use this fund to maintain and upgrade courthouse technology.

Restricted funds, like my Automation Fund, were wisely created by the Ohio General Assembly to make some monies untouchable. The point, clearly, was to prevent government from spending these funds for general purposes. Restricted funds help inoculate county offices from operational disasters during fiscal crunches. They also force fiscally responsible behavior by setting aside money, as we do in our own households, for important things like our children's education and our retirement.

Tough budgets, like the one we face now, force government to set priorities and make hard decisions on how to spend our money. Our courts recently acted in unison to find the money to keep our courthouse safe. Safety is without question a top priority. This heightened attention to careful spending of taxpayer dollars is a good thing.

Part of our current budget crisis stems from the fact that we spent our rainy day fund. During the past three years, our General Fund Reserve savings went from \$30 million to zero. Yes, zero.

This is the result of the very spending habits The Enquirer advocates and it is simply unacceptable.

It is also disappointing and unnecessary. Since I became clerk of courts in 2003, my office has come in under budget every year. Over the last five years, thanks to the hard work of my employees, we have given more than \$1.4 million back to the County General Fund. We made it a priority.

To follow The Enquirer's advice and spend all of our restricted funds would be shortsighted and irresponsible. Fiscal responsibility mandates that Hamilton County government should prepare for tough times by setting aside funds in a reserve fund. We should prioritize and limit our current expenditures. We must seek innovative approaches that allow government to do more with less. We must use restricted funds for their intended purposes. Finally, Hamilton County should stop doing what government often seems to do best with our money - spend it all.

Greg Hartmann is Hamilton County clerk of courts.