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Thomas Suddes' August 3 Columbus Dispatch column on the legislature's stagnation in the property tax problem and the EdChoice voucher effect on school funding.

The property tax bills in Ohio are out of control. In response, the Ohio legislature ignored the root problem and tried to solve the problem primarily by forcing school districts to return funds to property taxpayers. (The Governor vetoed this mindless legislation.) The legislature showered hundreds of millions on EdChoice voucher receivers and failed to fund the Cupp/Patterson Fair School Funding Plan. Thomas Suddes provides his perspective in an August 3 column published in the Columbus Dispatch. Please note, in particular, items two and three of his column.

Lawmakers can lower taxes instead of doing nothing

You'd never know it, looking at our La-Z-Boy legislature, but Ohio homeowners are being bled dry by skyrocketing property tax bills.

Sure, the General Assembly's sound-bite soldiers scatter proposed "solutions" like krewes tossing beads in New Orleans during Mardi Gras.

But to most Ohio property owners, that's just Statehouse bafflegab: "Inside millage," "rollbacks" and other legalese, big words that must be important because, hey, they're big words.

In fact, tinkering with Ohio's property tax mechanics (wording, and types of levies) just nibbles at the edges of what's become a statewide squeeze on Ohioans who own homes.

Here's what lawmakers should do instead of nothing

The only legislative actions that can slow the pace of property tax levies are Big Picture changes in Ohio's public school/property tax setup: One: Ohio, which ranks No. 7 among states in population, has 611 public school districts (not counting educational service centers, joint vocational school boards, etc.).

California, the nation's No. 1 state in population, has 1,015 school districts, according to the California Department of Education. The No. 2 state in population, Texas, has 1,207 districts.

The Ohio school district with the largest enrollment is Columbus City Schools, with about 43,000 pupils last year. (Cleveland Metropolitan School District enrolled about 35,000.)

But Ohio also has many low-enrollment districts. To cite just a few: Clark County's (the Springfield area) Southeastern schools (South Charleston) enrolled about 700 pupils. Mercer County's (Celina area) St. Henry Consolidated schools, in western Ohio, enrolled about 1,000 pupils. And Seneca County's (Tiffin area) Old Fort schools enrolled about 650 pupils.

That's not to say that those and other small Ohio districts don't or can't offer very solid schooling to their pupils, safe buildings and the individual attention (and greater extra-curricular opportunities) that pupils may get in smaller systems.

But 611 Ohio school districts mean 611 superintendents of schools; 611 treasurers or business managers; 611 bus systems — in short, 611 bureaucracies devouring money that otherwise should be spent in classrooms.

Two: The legislature has refused to fully fund the Cupp-Patterson Fair School Funding Plan, yet again in effect defying the Ohio Supreme Court's 1997 demand that the General Assembly fully and fairly public schools.

Three: The General Assembly has gone hog-wild in diverting public tax money to subsidize non-public (often religious) schools, a policy that a Franklin

County Common Pleas judge recently ruled is flat-out unconstitutional. (Our big-spending state government is, of course, appealing.)

Sorry: The Ohio Constitution, a document strangely unfamiliar to many General Assembly members, even though they must swear to uphold it, says this: “No religious or other sect, or sects, shall ever have any exclusive right to, or control of, any part of the school funds of this state.”

The seeming reply of the Statehouse’s pro-voucher state legislators: “ *Whatever.”*

Four: One of the most effective moves the General Assembly could make would be to reduce the number of levies demanding tax money from homeowners would be to end, or at least severely limit, the juicy Ohio property tax breaks that fat-cat businesses lobbyists woo from public officials.

Plainly stated, real estate tax breaks for business investors have grown out of control in Ohio. Here are telling data from Statehouse testimony last year by Jon Honeck, a senior policy analyst for the County Commissioners Association of Ohio: “The amount of [Ohio] property subject to tax abatements or tax increment financing (TIFs) has grown tremendously ... In 2014, [Ohio’s] local governments granted exemptions or TIFs to real property worth $9.8 billion. By 2022, this total had grown to $19.3 billion ...Tax abatements and TIFs originally served a purpose to lower the cost of a project in a blighted area that otherwise would not experience development. Now they have become routine and used even for greenfield [clean, open land] development,” Honeck told the General Assembly Joint Committee on Property Tax Review and Reform.

That, ladies and gentlemen of the General Assembly, is why real estate taxes are burdening Ohio’s homeowners.

It’s not a matter of double-talk about “inside millage” or how ballot wording describes a given levy request (“renewal?” “emergency?” etc.). It’s a matter of serving cream to fatcats — while shoving leftovers toward Ohio homeowners.

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