

Thomas Suddes' December 21 guest column in the Columbus Dispatch—Ohio lawmakers serve fatty pork to lobbyist—among other issues, points to shortfall in public education funding due to the “pork” provided to special interest groups.

Columnist Suddes points out that “education for citizenship, that is, public education continues to get shortchanged by a General Assembly that seems to think public schools, which roughly 90% of young Ohioans attend, should be afterthoughts, not priorities.” Further, Suddes alludes to the billion dollars per year in the state budget for private school vouchers.

It is unfortunate that so many legislators serve legislature leaders instead of their constituents regarding funding for public education. This is why the EdChoice private school voucher scheme is being challenged in court.

Ohio lawmakers serve fatty pork to lobbyist

Your Turn Thomas Suddes Guest columnist

Christmas gifts' wrapping paper will just be reaching the landfill when Capitol Square's inner circle — the Republican clique that runs Ohio — will gear up its 2026 Inaction Agenda.

A Statehouse maxim: When the General Assembly actually holds daily sessions during an election year, which 2026 is, the one sure risk for incumbents is that can get into political trouble even though Republican gerrymandering is supposed to make elections charades.

Still, in even-numbered years, as 2026 will be, the legislature parlays hundreds of millions of Ohio taxpayers' dollars into state construction projects.

Sure, some'll be plausible, such as the zillion-dollar, bipartisan prison construction marathon that began after then-new-Gov. Richard F. Celeste, a Greater Cleveland Democrat, took office in 1983.

More prisons, more prisoners

The law 'n' order crowd was happy; rural (mostly Republican) legislators saw their districts gain state jobs; plus, construction companies and unionized building trades made big money. And – oh yes – the number of inmates zoomed because, hey, cells are built to be filled.

According to the Prison Policy Initiative, Ohio had about 12,500 county jail and state prison inmates combined in 1978.

Today, according to Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction data, there are 45,932 inmates in state prisons alone.

Of them, 46.3% are African American in a state whose population is 13.6% African American.

Thus, a then-Democratic-run state administration and Democratic-led Ohio House of Representatives – during Ronald Reagan's presidency – came across as Ohio's Party of Law-and-Order. And we all feel safer, yes?

Now that Ohio has licked crime, the legislature is turning to circuses to distract Ohioans from, oh, ramshackle funding of public schools. (The “bread” part of budgeting?)

The Great Americans who run the U.S. economy — Messrs. Trump and Musk — will see to that.)

A taste for pork and spaghetti

The legislature has already fired the first volley in its “pork-first” campaign by agreeing to shower the Browns with cash to help the Browns move inland, away from Lake Erie, to Brook Park, near Cleveland Hopkins International Airport, amid a spaghetti bowl of freeway ramps.

The legislature's move was OK'd Dec. 9 by U.S. District Judge Edmund A. Sargus Jr. in Columbus (a Bill Clinton appointee), though parts of the lawsuit challenging the legislature's scheme may continue.

The judge's ruling touched off the Statehouse equivalent of an Oklahoma Land Rush, with team-and-stadium owners large and small sniffing around Capitol Square for public money.

For example, Nationwide Arena, home of the Columbus Blue Jackets National Hockey League franchise, is expected to seek \$100 million from Ohio's unclaimed funds pool — the source of the Brook Park money — for improvements to the Columbus arena, northwest of the Statehouse.

Lobbyist winning the game

That, no doubt, will be on the General Assembly's 2026 state construction bonanza list, and it's reasonable to assume other bread-and-circus operations may seek to sup on the Statehouse gravy train, too.

Complete coincidence: It appears that professional sports franchises with Ohio teams and allied organizations have deployed more than two dozen lobbyists at the Statehouse. (Yes, Ohio law forbids a registered Statehouse lobbyist "to actively advocate in exchange for compensation ... contingent in any way upon the passage, modification, or defeat of any legislation." But anyone who can't bring home the bacon doesn't get to eat.)

Meanwhile, what should be the state's first priority — education for citizenship, that is, public education — continues to get shortchanged by a General Assembly that seems to think public schools, which roughly 90% of young Ohioans attend, should be afterthoughts, not priorities.

So, earlier this year, the legislature, while stinting in its support of public schools, agreed to spend about \$965 million this fiscal year, and about \$1.05 billion in the year that'll begin July 1, to help parents pay for parochial and private school tuition for children who are K-12 pupils.

The General Assembly began earmarking state aid for pupils in parochial and private schools in 1967, spending \$15 million over two years at the request of Republican then-Gov. James A. Rhodes. That's about 1.5% of next fiscal year's \$1.05 billion voucher appropriation.

That 1967 private-school earmark required Rhodes to twist arms with fellow Republicans; in contrast, this year's voucher allotment was just business as usual. That's what passes for checks and balances at Ohio's Statehouse today.

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