

'Not fair nor equitable': Arizona faith leaders condemn proposed flat tax, say they will call for referendum if it passes

•By BrieAnna J. Frank

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Members of Arizona's faith community gathered at the Arizona Capitol on Thursday to condemn the proposed 2.5% flat tax, saying it would disproportionately impact marginalized communities and that they would be "among the first" to call for a referendum if it passes.

The Arizona Interfaith Network, a statewide coalition of organizations including the Valley Interfaith Project, Northern Arizona Interfaith Council and Yuma County Interfaith, held the news conference at 10 a.m.

The Rev. Martha Seaman, a deacon at Church of the Epiphany-Tempe who also serves as president of the Valley Interfaith Project board, began the conference by calling the flat tax a "dangerous" proposal.

The \$12.8 billion budget package, which passed the appropriations committees in both the House and Senate on Tuesday, would institute a single 2.5% rate for most taxpayers, eliminating the current brackets.

Individuals whose adjusted incomes are above \$250,000 (or \$500,000 for married couples) would pay a top rate of 4.5%.

Collapsing the tax rates would result in a permanent \$1.9 billion cut to state revenues, according to state estimates. Proponents of the plan argue that with a \$2 billion surplus, as well as rebounding sales-tax collections, the cut won't be felt as lower income taxes attract more businesses and economic growth.

'We're taught to care for the most vulnerable among us first'

The Rev. Hunter Ruffin, a senior pastor at Church of the Epiphany-Tempe, said the lost tax revenue would "cripple our state for generations to

come" and called the state budget "one of our most basic moral documents" that reflects who and what is prioritized in Arizona.

Ruffin said the "immoral" flat tax would benefit wealthy Arizonans at the cost of the poor and middle class, which he described as antithetical to religious teaching.

"You can turn to Leviticus, to Ezekiel, to Zachariah, to Malachi, to the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, to the whole of the Pauline epistles — I don't have time to go through the whole Bible, but that's the role faith plays in it," he said. "This is about the public good, the common good, and we're taught to care for the most vulnerable among us first, not simply when we have extra in our pockets and we feel charitable."

Ruffin said he and other religious leaders are particularly in tune with the needs and concerns of the community, given that they officiated "countless" funerals for those who died from COVID-19 and offered guidance to exhausted essential workers, families in mourning, and others lamenting the loss of the life that they knew before the pandemic hit.

"We know their stories and their struggles, we know firsthand their hurt, their anxiety, their depression, their grief," he said.

That understanding of what their congregants have already gone through because of the pandemic is what fuels their advocacy against the flat tax, which Seaman described as "not fair nor equitable."

Fr. Robert Fambrini S.J., pastor of St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church, said he's spent time with parishioners in Maryvale, home of some of Phoenix's most disadvantaged communities.

Fambrini said the lost tax revenue would inevitably be felt in areas such as public education, keeping people in a cycle of poverty instead of helping them out of it.

Group will hold community sessions, call for referendum if flat tax passes

Ruffin returned to the podium and called for more transparency from legislators in the form of statewide hearings and "robust public debate" prior to any vote on the proposal.

"If we're going to return some of the current surplus, let's do it equitably with priority to those who have lost and sacrificed the most in this pandemic," he said.

He offered a different vision for what the surplus could be used for, such as one-time tax credits for low-income and vulnerable communities, as well as investments in social services, education and infrastructure.

If the flat tax passes, Ruffin said the Arizona Interfaith Network would be "among the first" to call for a referendum, a measure in which voters can veto a law by gathering enough signatures to get the issue on the ballot.

He said the network would also be launching a series of community and congregational study sessions to further explore the flat tax and its implications.

Georgina Monsalvo, who works with Arizona Interfaith Network partner Stand for Children, said the network's inclusion of various religious, nonprofit and community organizations is key in getting their message across.

She said she worries about the impact of the flat tax on low-income families her organization works closely with, adding that she is also concerned budget cuts would affect the quality of her 11-year-old son's public school education.

"This is not something that's only going to affect one sector — it's affecting all of us," she said.

Monsalvo called the flat tax a "slap in the face" for communities still reeling from the pandemic and said members of the Arizona Interfaith Network have been camping out at the legislature as well as writing postcards and emails urging legislators to hear their concerns and vote accordingly.

"We hope he (Gov. Doug Ducey) hears the public, he hears the state — we don't want this, communities don't want this, we need to reinvest," she said.

The governor's office did not return The Republic's request for comment.

Arizona Republic reporter Mary Jo Pitzl contributed to this report.

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