



## Bluegrass Beacon BY JIM WATERS

### **A butt and a beer save lawmakers from trying austere**

By Jim Waters

My recent trip to Frankfort left my head spinning like that of a bar patron after a barrel of bourbon.

I came home with a five-ticket carnival ride's worth of political whiplash caused by the wheeling and dealing over a proposed increase in cigarette and alcohol taxes.

Politicians who care more about "photo opps" than the impact of their policies on us working stiffs basked in the limelight, or, in the case of Sen. David Williams, flipped positions in the shadows of a back room.

Special-interest groups offer bleeding-heart stories about how their constituents cannot survive unless the state raises taxes during this economically sluggish season of discontent as justification for punishing a specific group of low-income Kentuckians – smokers.

As with any circus, enter the clowns: The alcohol lobby.

It flowed in full force in Frankfort in protest against a 6-percent sales tax on alcohol. They drove logo-bearing tractor-trailers throughout the Capitol. One brightly decorated rolling ad for Jim Beam whiskey, offered the slogan "It's what's inside that counts."

It slowed traffic but not the push from Kentucky's big-spending politicians to do what never works: Raise taxes to reverse economic slowdowns. Indeed, the liquor tossed on the Capitol steps in protest had a better chance of stemming the tax tide if poured down the gullets of lawmakers.

Apparently some bureaucrat made the drinkers take down their signs posted around the Capitol, one of which stated, "The most dangerous ingredient in beer? Taxes."

However, stories about the impact that raising taxes would have on already overburdened Kentucky taxpayers and small-business owners went noticeably missing through much of the political posturing.

The exception occurred at a press conference hosted by the Kentucky Club for Growth in the Capitol rotunda. Becky Baker, owner of the Discount Tobacco Mart in Florence, said that increasing cigarette taxes would drive her out of business, since her customers come from across the border – Indiana and Ohio.

"I provide health insurance for five of our eight workers," Baker told me. "Do we really want to put them out of work and cause them to lose their benefits when it's so difficult to find jobs to begin with?"

But that's not the kind of logic most politicians want you to hear.

They only want to instill in the hardworking taxpayers of the commonwealth a fear that if taxes do not go up, groups on the low end of the income pole will stagger through the soup lines receiving only a politically correct smile and a "God bless you."

Forgive me for my cynicism.

But we'd have plenty of money to provide basic services required by the people and to add big chunks of beef to that soup-line sampler if lawmakers prioritized spending so that needed programs rather than local pork-barrel projects were the beneficiaries of our hard-earned tax dollars.

Besides, when we are going to catch on that such bleeding-heart blathering is the only "game" spending-addicted politicians know? Satirist H.L. Mencken said, "The whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed (and hence clamorous to be led to safety) by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins, all of them imaginary."

Americans for Tax Reform reported that while the percent change of *national* GDP growth has continually slowed, Kentucky's expenditures grew by a whopping, inflation-adjusted 10.6 percent between 2003 and 2007. During that time, Kentucky's population increased by only 3 percent.

I'm baffled. How can politicians like the usually strong Senate president claim we need more revenue? He seems to have lost his political heart.

Doesn't he know that "It's what inside that counts?"

I need an 18-wheeler-sized drink.

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