



Governor gets cranky, and Medicaid session gets nowhere

By Jim Waters

Kentucky politics never lacks a rough-and-tumble side.

In one sense, that's good. I want policymakers to argue from the strength of their convictions, not just apply rubber stamps. But they must keep the heated debate centered on the issues.

Unfortunately, during the special legislative session dealing with how to balance the state's [Medicaid](#) budget, name-calling has trumped substantive debate on issues — particularly, and somewhat surprisingly, name-calling from the Governor's Office.

Gov. Steve Beshear, despite my differences with him on policy, usually comes off as even-keeled and likeable, which serves him well. But the farther we get into this year's Medicaid-budget debate, the testier he gets.

The governor doubtless remains concerned about joining the ranks of the unemployed, a place where so many Kentuckians have found themselves during much of his administration.

On Louisville's WHAS radio, the governor, ticked off about the Senate's offer to balance this year's Medicaid budget by cutting government spending across-the-board next year, lashed out: "Sen. Williams and all of those fat guys had plenty of time to talk about it, tell us the problems with it, whatever."

Williams, who wants Beshear's job, responded by calling the governor "weak."

Later, the [governor attacked the Bluegrass Institute](#) on that same radio station, referring to its research as "a bunch of baloney," and the organization as "a right-wing think tank composed of one person that puts his blog up on the line all the time."

That rant offends Oscar Mayer by besmirching one of its finest products and the first-rate editors who put this column on newspaper opinion pages. They don't always agree with my position on the issues. But they understand the importance of substantive debate.

I also have the privilege of working with a great group of [Bluegrass Institute](#) colleagues.

Their work in filing a plethora of open records requests to determine the governor's justification for his claims that nothing needs to be done to address the state's \$32 billion in-the-hole pension systems deserve better than to be dismissed as lunchmeat. Leave the pension funds alone, Beshear says. They will fix themselves in 15 years.

Meanwhile, the governor says he misspoke on the "fat guys" comment, claiming he was trying to say one word and then decided to say a second, different word and then a third one — altogether different — came out.

Perhaps that's what happened with his comments on the pension problem. Perhaps he meant to say: "Kick the can down the road past the next election, and then we can shuffle the numbers around and spin our way up and out of this hole we currently find ourselves in, even as we keep deepening it."

Perhaps on the Medicaid crisis, he meant to say: "Let's not cut any spending until after the next election, then we'll be able to cut and cut and cut, no matter how it impacts agencies relying on that money to help our most vulnerable residents."

Perhaps concerning the Bluegrass Institute, he intended to say: "All these [open records requests](#) filed to find out whether my claims about spending cuts and the impact of my threat to reduce Medicaid reimbursement rates by 35 percent are really getting under my skin. I'm just not used to this sort of scrutiny."

Perhaps the governor really wants baloney but instead must eat crow.

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