Righting California's ship of state

Robert M. Hertzberg ; Sunday, January 10, 2010

With our budget in crisis, our economy in the doldrums and our politics in disarray, the great temptation for anyone offering an agenda for California in 2010 would be to borrow the goal former state Senate President Pro Tempore John Burton once set during another challenging year: "Just to get out alive."

Sage advice indeed for those who hold political office. But what about the rest of us?

Thankfully, the formal duty of addressing both houses of the Legislature on the future of our state each year rests only with the governor, whom I applaud for striking an optimistic and constructive tone at a difficult time and for rightly placing a high priority on higher education as a cornerstone of California's future.

You might not have heard his speech. But whether you're raising a family or starting a business, getting an education or looking for work - we've all got a stake in the state of our state. And 2010 isn't shaping up as a year when we can afford to simply stay the course. By almost any measure, the status quo isn't working. What, then, is to be done?

The tradition is to lay out a set of policy prescriptions by topic: education, transportation, health care, prisons and the like. This approach treats each policy area as a universe unto itself, at best only vaguely connected to a larger whole.

It's a great system for lobbyists and special interests, which can then focus attention on the needs of their clients and causes without regard to overall costs. Each bill, each study, each pilot program, each tax loophole and each new mandate individually amounts to no more than "budget dust."

But add them all together and compound the cost of carrying them out year after year. Then toss in the effects of a crippling recession on state revenues. And finally, turn the entire conundrum over to a system practically designed for stalemate - giving veto power over the budget to as few as a third of state lawmakers.

Sadly, this is the state of our state.
So the most urgent task before us isn't prison reform, expanding health care or improving transportation. It's righting the ship of state itself.

Until we have a government that can enact responsible budgets on time, set priorities for programs and deliver real results, the latest and greatest policy innovation is almost destined to fail.

That's the conclusion five of California's leading foundations came to in creating California Forward, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that I co-chair, whose sole purpose is to bring citizens together to help make our government work again.

Last year, California Forward endorsed landmark redistricting reform, and its sister organization, the California Forward Action Fund, played a leading role in passing that measure, Proposition 11 - reform that leaders of both political parties opposed.

Now, after months of research and hundreds of discussions across the state, the fund has crafted two initiatives for the November ballot to reform our state's budget process and give back to local communities some of the power they have lost to Sacramento.

These efforts have attracted interest and support. In his State of the State address last week, the governor spoke of the urgent need for budget reform and called for the Legislature to act.

Where to start? One initiative, the Best Practices Budget Accountability Act, would make some practical, commonsense changes to end budget gridlock. It takes sound budget practices successful in other states and applies them to California:

**Pay as you go** - Requiring leaders to make hard choices by identifying right from the start how any new program would be paid for.

**Reduce inefficiency and waste** - Requiring the governor and Legislature to set clear goals for every program, measure its effectiveness, and fix or cut what doesn't work.

**Pay down debt** - Setting aside funds from occasional spikes in revenues to pay off debt.

**Long-term planning** - Requiring leaders to think ahead by creating two-year budgets and long-term revenue and spending forecasts.

**Majority-vote budgets** - Keeping a small minority of politicians from holding up the budget for the entire state but requiring a two-thirds majority for any tax increase.

**No budget, no paycheck** - Requiring legislators to forfeit their salary, travel and living expenses whenever they miss the budget deadline.

The fund's other proposal, the Community Funding Protection and Accountability Act, would shift power away from Sacramento and give more responsibility to local government - your county, city or town, and your school board.
It keeps politicians in Sacramento from taking tax dollars from our counties, cities and schools to balance the state budget. The plan also gives cities, counties and schools new incentives to work together, eliminate overlapping programs and become more efficient.

The California Forward Action Fund will gather signatures soon to qualify both initiatives for the November ballot.

I know. For most people, the topic of government reform is about as appealing as a serving of steamed spinach. These issues just don't have the political pizzazz of building schools, expanding highways or opening a health clinic - until you consider what's at stake.

California has always led the way - in jobs and technology, education and quality of life - but our role as a national leader is in jeopardy.

The California Forward plan gives us the tools to fix what's broken in our state. It means more problem-solving and less finger-pointing. And ultimately, it means more stable, long-term funding for what matters most: schools, universities, health care, transportation and public safety.

California Forward's plan gets California moving again so California can lead again. And that's not just exciting - it's vital to the future of this still-great state.

Robert M. Hertzberg is a co-chair of California Forward, a nonpartisan reform group supported by contributions from California foundations. California Forward's Web site on government reform is at www.caforward.org. Contact us via our online submissions form at sfgate.com/chronicle/submissions/#1.