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Poll Shows Interest in State Tax Reforms

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More than eight out of 10 West Virginians said they support a revenue neutral restructuring of the state tax code, according to a poll conducted by RMS Strategies for The State Journal.

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Nearly a decade has passed, and two separate families have lived in the Governor's Mansion since West Virginia leaders considered restructuring the state's tax system.

But state leaders may want to think about tackling taxes again.

More than eight out of 10 West Virginians said they support a revenue neutral restructuring of the state tax code, according to a poll conducted by RMS Strategies for The State Journal.

In addition, more than nine out of 10 registered voters said they considered issues dealing with taxes to be one of the most important issues for Gov. Joe Manchin and lawmakers to address when they come together in January for the 2006 legislative session.

RMS Strategies interviewed 400 registered voters for the poll between Nov. 22 and Dec. 1. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 4.9 percentage points.

"What this tells me is that there certainly is an argument out there that West Virginians are ready and in favor of a wholesale restructuring of the tax system as opposed to incremental changes," said Mark Blankenship, RMS's senior vice president.

But residents said they definitely would like to see some taxes change -- either because of the burden on their personal finances or because of the taxes' impact on the state.

The most maligned tax, according to the poll, is the gasoline tax. A combined 83 percent of residents said that tax posed some type of burden on them financially. The next closest tax in terms of personal financial burden, according to the poll, was the personal property tax on vehicles and homes. A combined 76 percent of the people said that tax posed a burden.

About 81 percent of residents said if West Virginia were to lower the gasoline tax it would have a positive impact on the state's economy. Another 81 percent of people said lowering the food tax would improve the state's economy.

But when asked whether they believed lawmakers or the governor will actually take up the issue, residents were doubtful.

A combined 69 percent of registered voters said it was unlikely political leaders will reduce the tax on gasoline, while 49 percent said lawmakers will not reduce the food tax.

Nearly eight out of 10 people said it was unlikely the state will ever reduce income tax rates or personal property tax rates on homes and automobiles.

"This reflects the general cynicism most people have of the government these days," said Cal Kent, vice president for Marshall University's Center for Business and Economic Research. "Most people don't think leaders will make the tough decisions that need to be made."

The last time state leaders launched a comprehensive study of the tax structure was in 1997 under Gov. Cecil Underwood. Kent was a member of Underwood's Governor's Commission on Fair Taxation.

Voters don't just want to see the taxes they pay reduced. More than 77 percent of people polled said lowering taxes for small businesses would have a positive impact on the state's economy. Another 57 percent said lowering severance taxes for coal and other extraction industries would be good for the economy.

Blankenship said those sentiments are reflected in answers to another poll question, which asked registered voters which industries they believed would be most important to the state in 15 years. About 73 percent of people said the coal industry would continue to be very important.

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