

Time for bravery

by The Anniston Star Editorial Board

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Go ahead, Alabama Legislature.

Be brave. Be fearless.

Do the right thing.

Do something that strips away politicization and helps thousands of everyday Alabamians get by a little better tomorrow than they do today.

We dare you.

In this case, history isn't on the state Legislature's side. Legislators in the state House voted four times last year on an amendment that would remove the state sales tax on groceries. Four times it failed, even though many legislators on both sides of the aisle agreed with the basic premise that lessening low- and middle-income Alabamians' tax burden at the grocery store was a worthwhile concept.

To his credit, state Rep. John Knight, D-Montgomery, isn't giving in. He's sponsoring this year's version of the bill that includes concessions to House Republicans, many of whom opposed the idea last year because it would take away the state deduction for federal income taxes for the well-to-do.

This year, Knight's bill is strengthened because it removes the 4 percent state sales tax on groceries and over-the-counter medicine. Funding for schools would be protected by ending a large tax deduction for the highest paid.

Additionally, the bill would allow couples earning up to \$200,000 and single taxpayers earning up to \$100,000 to continue to take their entire state income tax deduction for federal income taxes paid. Last year's opponents of the bill should like that.

Alabama Arise, a nonprofit that advocates on behalf of the state's low-income residents, estimates that a typical Alabama family would save approximately \$100 per family member each year if Knight's bill passes.

Of course, this is where bravery enters the equation.

The details are damning for Alabama, which is one of only two states — Mississippi is the other — that continues to collect sales taxes on groceries. It's a regressive tax, one of the least-defensible types. It's an immoral, unbecoming policy choice.

What makes it worse is that Alabama's ranks of low-income residents are deep, and they're growing. The lingering effects of the Great Recession don't help. Thus, collecting sales tax revenue on Alabamians' food equates to a deliberate effort to allow unnecessary pain.

Alabama must divorce itself from its western neighbor and join the other 48 states that shun a regressive food tax that particularly hurts low-income residents.

To get there, Republicans must help. They must acknowledge that this year's version alleviates some of their concerns about the taxation of high-income taxpayers. And they must see that helping everyday Alabamians is a vital part of the reason they were sent to Montgomery.

For some legislators, it will take bravery to do the right thing.

But the time has come. This bill should pass. Alabamians need help. This is one major way the Legislature can help move the state into the 21st century.