



# **TOM SCARRITT: Steep tax barriers make hard lives harder**

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**By Tom Scarritt -- The Birmingham News**

Almost a quarter-century ago, this newspaper began an editorial series with this simple declaration: Alabama's taxes are unfair.

We have spent decades advocating for comprehensive tax reform, for rebuilding a revenue-collection system that has proved to be inefficient and inadequate, as well as unfair. We have made very little progress. The biggest step toward tax fairness was a long-overdue adjustment to the income tax that raised the threshold at which we begin taxing income.

While comprehensive tax reform remains elusive, the Legislature again this year has an opportunity to distribute the tax burden more fairly.

While state and local taxes as a whole are low in Alabama, compared with the rest of the nation, the tax burden on low- and middle-income families is high. We should give them some relief.

A simple way to do that is to remove the state sales tax on groceries and over-the-counter drugs. The concept is simple; the execution has proved difficult.

Year after year, state Rep. John Knight, D-Montgomery, proposes this reform. But the law does not change. This year, the Legislature should give the people of Alabama a chance to vote for tax fairness.

The sticking point comes in Knight's plan for replacing the revenue that would be lost without a sales tax on groceries. He proposes to remove the state income tax deduction for federal income taxes paid.

In tandem with the sales tax change, this would have the effect of moving a significant tax burden off the poorest Alabamians and onto those who make the most money. That is a change we need to make in a state where low- and middle-income taxpayers have been paying more than twice the percentage of their income to state and local taxes than the richest pay.

"Asking the richest Alabamians to pay at least the same share as the rest of us is just common sense," said Kimble Forrister, state coordinator for Alabama Arise, a coalition that lobbies for the poor.

That common sense, though, clashes with our state's historic antipathy toward taxes.

"I don't see a willingness of the Legislature to raise taxes on a large segment of the Alabama population," said state Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur. But a far larger segment would see tax relief under Knight's plan.

We cannot move from an unfair tax system to a fairer system without asking the people who were the big winners under the old system to pay more. Reform is not free. The benefit comes in helping those who need it most.

"Low-income families face steep tax barriers that make hard lives even harder," President Ronald Reagan said in his fourth State of the Union address, and he moved many of those families off the federal income tax rolls.

Alabama legislators should recognize the current tax law makes hard lives even harder, and take the first steps toward lowering that steep barrier.

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