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What gives? It's time for yet another call to stop taxing groceries

by The Anniston Star Editorial Board

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Call it like it is: By being one of only two states to tax groceries, Alabama casts a devilish glance at the state's poorest residents and says, coldly, "We don't care about you."

How else to explain it? Alabama and Mississippi — Deep South states that share similar demographics — are addicted to the sales-tax revenue they receive from taxing food. The other 48 states don't do that.

In Alabama, it's wrapped up in the politics of Montgomery, where most Republicans refuse to unclench their grip from the money those taxes raise. GOP legislators say they're uncomfortable removing a regressive sales tax while also removing the federal income tax deduction from state income taxes.

Of course, everyone knows that argument isn't about fairness. It's about the politics of Montgomery, of Republicans protecting the state's well-to-do who, understandably, do not want to let go of that deduction.

So Alabama remains an exemption to the American rule. We have a state sales tax on groceries, which hurts the middle- and low-income residents more than the rich. We tax Alabamians on the most basic necessity of life. And repeated efforts by activists to change Montgomery's mindset have, in large part, gone nowhere.

We note that a small group of about 30 people attended a rally last week at the State Capitol to call for an end to the grocery tax. The rally included the idea's long-time legislative champion, Rep. John Knight, D-Montgomery, who is trying to get a sales tax-removal bill through the Legislature again this spring. We fully expect that bill to meet stiff challenges.

If compromise is a winning political proposition, then the best option may be a bill pushed by Sen. Gerald Dial, R-Lineville. That legislation would phase out the grocery tax by 2015 and replace the revenue by raising the overall state sales tax from 4 to 5 percent.

Kimble Forrister, director of Alabama Arise, which advocates on behalf of low-income Alabamians, told the Montgomery Advertiser that his group is opposed to "replacing one regressive tax with another regressive tax." That's solid logic.

Yet, little else has oozed out of Montgomery that hints at success for Knight's long-standing proposal. Many in the GOP-controlled Legislature have no intention of voting to remove the federal income-tax deduction. Democrats and advocacy groups have tweaked their proposals time and time again, hoping to finally find a palatable middle ground that both political sides

could support.

Dial's legislation, hardly perfect, isn't much of a compromise, as Alabama Arise points out. But it is something.

Alabamians who live check-to-check and have little for their hard work have every right to look at Montgomery and say: What gives? It comes down to priorities and people. In this case, legislators clearly are not prioritizing the people who need the most assistance.

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