

'No' on H, 'yes' on I and J

THERE'S no need to blast big government for wasting taxpayer dollars when small governments can do it with equal success — just look at East Palo Alto.

In July, the city approved a half-million dollar settlement with a former cop who claimed he was wrongfully terminated. Another \$1 million has been set aside over the past year to help defray costs that could arise if the city's utility tax is declared illegal. A judge has questioned the tax because the state Supreme Court has ruled taxpayers have the right to challenge a tax imposed without voter approval — and this tax is such a one.

The most recent opportunity to squander taxpayer money comes from East Palo Alto's ex-city manager Monika Hudson, who claims her rights were violated when her contract was ended. She also claims the city violated state open-meeting laws — something Mayor Duane Bay has already admitted. An attorney for the city, Cynthia O'Neill, says she hopes the city and Hudson can reach an "amicable conclusion." That phrase rings with the jingle of more money going down the drain.

The bottom line is: Keep money away from the council. These lawsuits are not of the brand typically faced by cities around the County. They betray much deeper problems concerning management and leadership. These issues will not be resolved overnight — and they surely won't be cured by tossing taxpayers' money around like it's a Monopoly game.

That's why it's disappointing to see Measure H on the ballot — an attempt by the city to continue collecting its utility tax. The legality of the tax has already been questioned by a judge, who reviewed a class-action lawsuit filed by residents earlier this year. The tax generates close to \$1 million annually — enough to cover about two lawsuits.

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Mayor Bay claims the money is needed for vital city services and "general governmental purposes" as the measure so vaguely states. That covers just about everything, from police equipment to street improvements to youth services. Sorry — East Palo Alto's poor spending record proves council members don't need more money dumped into the general fund. Rather than turning outward to solve their problems, city leaders should turn inward and focus on personnel and training to avoid some of the deeper management issues that have been such a drain on resources. Vote "no" on Measure H.

On the flip side, Measures I and J deserve a yes vote — if only to keep future councils from wasting more money. Measures I and J would each earmark 10 percent of future hotel taxes for specific purposes. Measure I would set aside funds for children, family and senior citizen services, while Measure J would collect funds for affordable housing. Each measure will probably generate about \$250,000 annually for their respective purposes.

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We see no reason to hold money back in these important areas. Even with the earmarked money, 80 percent of future hotel taxes would end up in the general fund. That's more than enough for council members to work with.

Opponents claim the earmarked funds would turn into a paycheck for consultants — but they've produced no evidence of how this could happen. The sad truth is, any earmarked money in East Palo Alto is a good thing — there's a better chance it won't be spent on attorney fees.

Cheers,

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