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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

JANUARY 15, 2019

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16.01.2019

Trump's Wall and the Montana Senate's Theater of the Absurd

Montana's Legislature convened its regular 90-day session last week. And while the thousands of bills introduced run the gamut from great ideas to really bad ones, Montana Senate President, Bozeman Republican Scott Sales, went over the edge into pure theater of the absurd when he suggested sending \$8 million of Montanans' state tax dollars to build Donald Trump's equally absurd \$5.7 billion border wall for a non-existent "emergency."

The Montana Legislature has some very well-defined constitutional duties, primarily to write the state laws under which all Montanans live, pass bills establishing taxation to raise revenue for government operations and to appropriate money for the implementation of those operations.

The Montana Constitution provides no authority or mandate to send Montana taxpayers' dollars to the president for the expenses of federal government. In fact, Article 5, Section 11, (4) specifically states that: "A general appropriation bill shall contain only appropriations for the ordinary expenses of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, for interest on the public debt, and for public schools." That is followed by (5), which states: "No appropriation shall be made for religious, charitable, industrial, educational or benevolent purposes to any private individual, private association, or private corporation not under control of the state."

In the meantime, as Trump's shutdown achieves the dubious record as the longest in federal government history, the impacts on Montana's furloughed federal workers and government agencies are escalating. The Washington Post, in an article on the shutdown's

effects on individual states, listed Montana as one of the top-ranked states for furloughed federal employees. These are our neighbors, Montana citizens, who are in the middle of winter without receiving their paychecks — nor are federal government contractors who run Montana businesses and pay Montana taxes.

Montana's many Superfund sites are likewise awaiting remediation while the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is shut down. Unfortunately, unlike the shuttered federal agency, the toxic pollutants from those sites continue to seep into surface and groundwater and are blown into the air, exacerbating the problems the EPA was supposed to be solving.

To put a more definitive face on Sales' ridiculous idea, that \$8 million would pay for about 650 students to attend college debt-free for a year. Or it could pay for expanded preschools for our children or used as a match to leverage about \$53 million in federal highway funds to rebuild roads and bridges. It could be used to provide health care for our citizens. Or it could go to any of a thousand different pressing needs to keep the fourth-largest state in the union going by taking care of Montana and Montanans.

But even though the facts are clear that illegal immigration is at its lowest point in years and most of Trump's claims of drugs and terrorists are pure bunk, Senator Sales thinks we should send the money off to Trump or Texas or wherever he thinks it should go to assuage a petulant president's hissy fit over building his unneeded and ineffective wall on our southern border.

Were Sales to adhere to Republican ideology he would be condemning Trump's threat of declaring an imaginary national emergency as a vast overreach of executive power. Likewise, Sales seems to have abandoned the Republican claim of "fiscal conservatism" with his willingness to spend scarce Montana state revenue on a federal project that Congress won't approved.

It's time for Sales to do his job of running Montana's Senate and taking care of Montanans — not give us theater of the absurd to support an unpopular president and his even more unpopular border wall.