

THE DAILY SENTINEL

Editorial: Bell banks on voters caring for their colleges

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In assessing Colorado's current state budget situation, Bell Policy Center President Wade Buchanan uses the familiar line from an old television commercial: "We've fallen and we can't get up."

The fall came with the deep recession that hit Colorado beginning in 2001, severely cutting revenue coming into state tax coffers for several years on end.

We can't get up — or can't get back to the sound budget footing that existed prior to the recession — because the ratcheting-down effect of the state's TABOR Amendment ties current state revenue to recession levels.

To remedy that situation, the Denver-based Bell center has begun a statewide effort to convince voters to support Referendums C and D on this November's ballot.

Referendum C asks voters to lift temporarily the TABOR revenue limits on the state budget — as is allowed under TABOR — and use that additional money for health care, public education and higher education and transportation projects.

Referendum D, which could take effect only if both it and Referendum C are approved by voters, would authorize the state to issue up to \$2.07 billion in bonds for highway projects and long-overdue deferred maintenance for buildings at public schools, colleges and universities. It would also provide money for police and firefighter pension funds. The money to support the bonds would come from additional state revenue the state would be authorized to keep under TABOR beginning in 2011.

Informing voters of the details of the two measures — and why passing them is important to all Coloradans — is no easy task. That's especially true when opponents are using sophistic slogans like, "No refund for you," to convince voters to reject the measures.

Referendum C would prevent TABOR refunds over the next five years like those state taxpayers saw in the late 1990s. But the refunds are projected to return beginning in 2011, along with a modest reduction in the income-tax rate. Furthermore, nothing in the measure would change normal state tax refunds that people receive on their income-tax returns.

To refute such misleading attacks, Bell is spreading the message of what Coloradans stand to lose if the referendums are not passed. Wednesday in Grand Junction, it focused on the impacts to Mesa State College if Referendum C does not pass. Chief among them is rapidly rising tuition to make up for projected declines in state revenue and a growing student body. The result will be that a once-affordable college will become less and less so for everyone, but particularly for those with limited incomes.

In other communities, the message is even more dire. In some places, it's not impossible that community colleges or four-year institutions may end up closing. Bell is engaged in an admirable undertaking to educate people about the critical impacts that will occur if Referendums C and D aren't passed. For the sake of Colorado's future, we can only hope that the majority of Coloradans are listening and taking that message to heart.