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Everyone Needs To Sacrifice To Cut Connecticut's Budget Deficit

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It's the season of entitlement, when nobody sacrifices.

Not the Fairfield County millionaires, the Boys & Girls Club of Meriden, the state employee unions and certainly not the Democrats who lead our legislature. This year, everyone gave at the office.

The Democrats say Gov. Rell's plan to plug the current \$337 million state budget shortfall by slicing services and aid to municipalities would mean the loss of 5,000 jobs. They'll take no action today when the legislature meets in a special session called by Rell.

As Danbury Mayor Mark Boughton told me, "everything is a sacred cow."

At least that's how it felt when I listened to impassioned pleas last week and again at a Capitol press conference Monday when nonprofits said the roof would collapse if the governor's proposed "cuts to kids" go through.

Of course we need a safety net, particularly for young children. I've seen how school-based health clinics keep children in class and how day care enables parents to go to work, actually saving us money in the long run. I understand the importance of after-school programs at the Boys & Girls Club. I know well what happens when a parent becomes gravely ill and there's no one to care for them.

But Gov. Rell is right about this much: Everyone must be a part of solving this mess.

"Everybody has to sacrifice in this. I don't mean just towns and cities — I mean every single agency," Rell told me Monday afternoon, reminding me that state revenues will likely not improve until 2011. By 2012, the budget deficit is projected to be \$3 billion.

"We all have to say we can't afford this and we must figure out what we can afford and start to prioritize."

Structural change is already here. We are losing jobs that pay solid middle class salaries and replacing them with service job incomes. Since 1969, we've lost 300,000 manufacturing jobs — 15,000 this



year alone.

How different will things be once Connecticut emerges from the Great Recession? While manufacturing jobs pay an average of \$70,000 per year, the average customer service representative's job a predicted fast-growing occupation — pays about half that.

Doesn't that suggest it's time to do things a little bit differently?

Instead, I listened the other day to business leaders complain about the income tax, as if that's the problem. A day-care center director Monday morning said that a \$4 million reduction in day care subsidies alone would result in the loss of 700 jobs. A union leader told me state employees have sacrificed more than any other workers in the state this year. By evening, House Speaker Christopher Donovan said Rell's cuts would mean the loss of 5,000 jobs.

I don't believe any of them. Everyone needs to share more in this sacrifice.

We do need an expanded, more progressive, income tax — one that includes more balanced taxes on the wealthy *and* the middle income. But we also need a smaller state government that no longer provides unheard-of lifetime benefits for people who retire in their mid-50s. We need leaders who set priorities for years to come — attracting young, educated workers and expanding bioscience research are two examples — instead of pandering to voters.

"It is depressing," said state Sen. Ed Meyer, a Democrat from Guilford. "We badly need a new governor. We probably need new legislative leaders."

Two municipal leaders with higher aspirations — Boughton, a Republican, of Danbury, and Democratic First Selectwoman Mary Glassman, of Simsbury, told me there is an important political lesson for state residents.

"There is no strategy. What you are left with is everybody fighting," Glassman said. "This is just the beginning of a very ugly process."

When everyone feels like they've done enough, when everyone feels entitled, this is what we get. That really is depressing.

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