

# A Case for Government

**Oregon Thrives**

Portland, Oregon

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**Public Works: the Dēmos Center for the Public Sector**

Dēmos: A Network for Ideas & Action

[www.demos.org](http://www.demos.org)

## Our Goal

Public support for a government dedicated to the common good and empowered to address the challenges and opportunities of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.





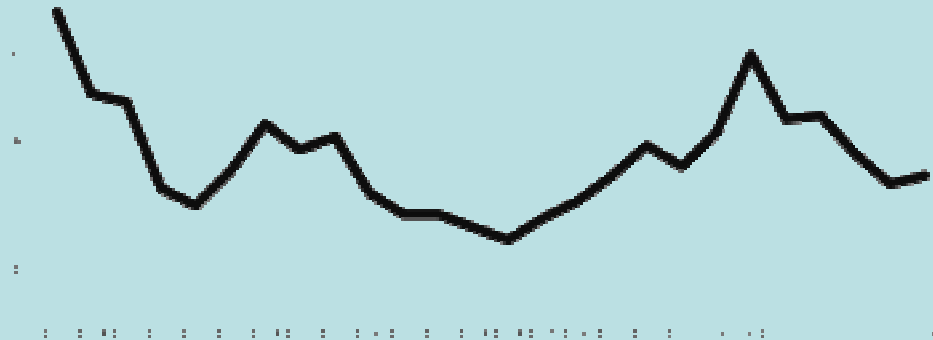
**America is at a cross-roads:  
Public Challenges & Public Will**

**Dominant perceptions of government  
undermine support for public solutions.**



# A Slide in Faith & Trust

Trust in Government  
Just about always, sometimes





## Contested Terrain



## Role of Government







## Our Research & Field Work

### Research

- Government
- The Economy
- Budgets & Taxes

### In the Field

- Policy Shops
- Advocates
- Coalitions
- Electeds & Managers
- Unions

## A Multi-Discipline Approach

Our work is informed by the perspectives of multiple disciplines and fields:

- Cognitive Science
- Linguistics
- Public Opinion Research
- Cultural Anthropology
- Behavioral and social sciences
- Communications, journalism and media studies
- Social Movement Studies

a little theory...

cultural models

media

frames

knowledge

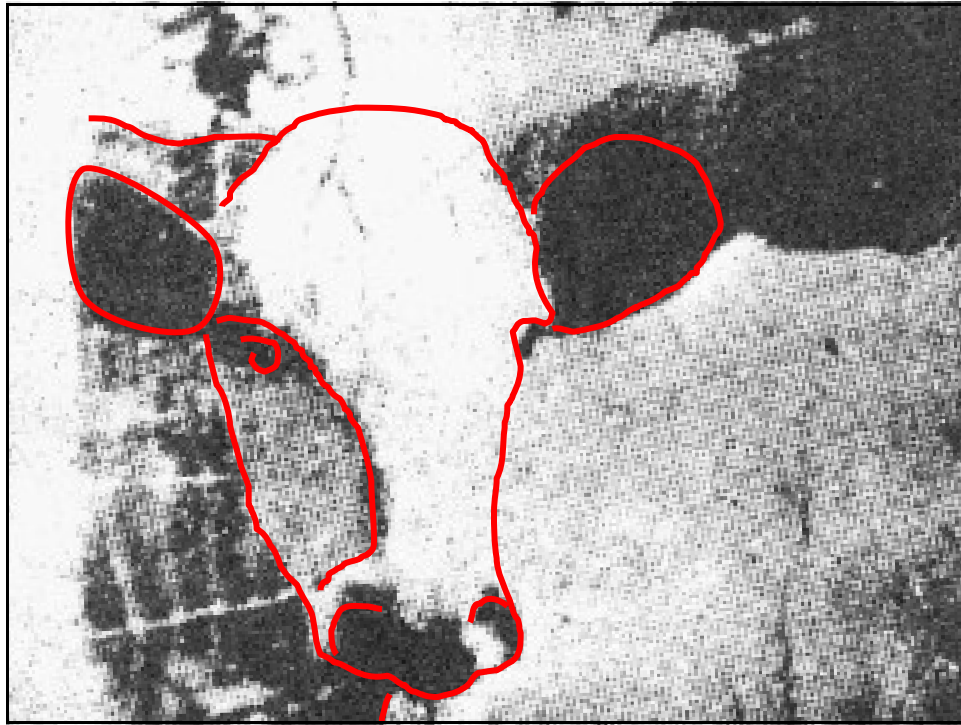
stories

experience

We are not blank slates

stereotypes

myths



our brains are  
rapidly seeking  
to connect new  
information to  
the existing  
**stories** in our  
heads

# Stories



Cognitive



Cultural

## Master Narratives

Whenever we engage in public debates we may think of ourselves as conduits of information. However, our audiences think about those same policies, issues, and programs in terms of the background story—**the master narrative**—that lies beneath our bullet-points, facts, statistics, and legal citations.



**The Triumphant Individual**



"Self-Made Man" – Irene Ritter

**Independence**

**The Benevolent Community**



Dave Kolpack / AP

**Interdependence**

**Individual Problem**



**Personal Solutions**

**Collective Problem**



**Structural Solutions**

## Short-Term Focus



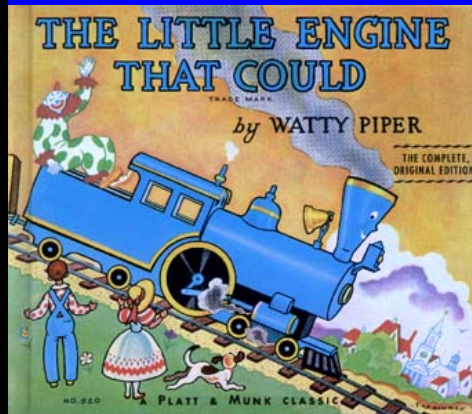
## Long-Term Thinking



Chicken Little

## Desperation

## Aspiration



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# New Mexico

## Land that used to be Enchanting

[Home](#)  
[Wilderness](#)  
[Threats to Wilderness](#)  
[Get Involved: About Wilderness](#)  
[Special Places](#)  
[Gila Wilderness](#)  
[Laird Peak Wilderness](#)  
[Pecos Wilderness](#)  
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### New Mexico Wilderness



#### A Wilderness Legacy

When Spanish settlers first arrived in New Mexico four hundred years ago, they described rolling hills of golden grass and cacti that came up to the knees of mounted horsemen. Later, Aldo Leopold, "the father of Wilderness", wrote of this land of unparalleled biological diversity that the "...dark dotted hills, ... pine clad mesas, and lazy trout streams ... come near to being the dream of creation."

Sadly, today most of the rolling grasses are gone, the streams have long dried up, and many of the speckled mesas and hills have been sacrificed to economic development and motorized recreation. These lands, once treasured as some of the wildest in the west, are quickly dwindling.

#### Wilderness Protection is the Answer

There are well over 4.5 million acres of potential Wilderness in New Mexico; only an aggressive Wilderness advocacy campaign will create the public demand to permanently protect these areas as Wilderness.



### New Mexico – Land of Enchantment

The wild lands of New Mexico have been the source of our spirit and culture for a thousand years. We have a legacy of living with the land, not just on it. A new century poses new challenges – balancing growth and prosperity with the open space that is our heritage. The Wilderness Alliance is working to keep this balance and ensure that New Mexico remains enchanting for future generations . . .

**What are our  
stories about  
Government . . .**





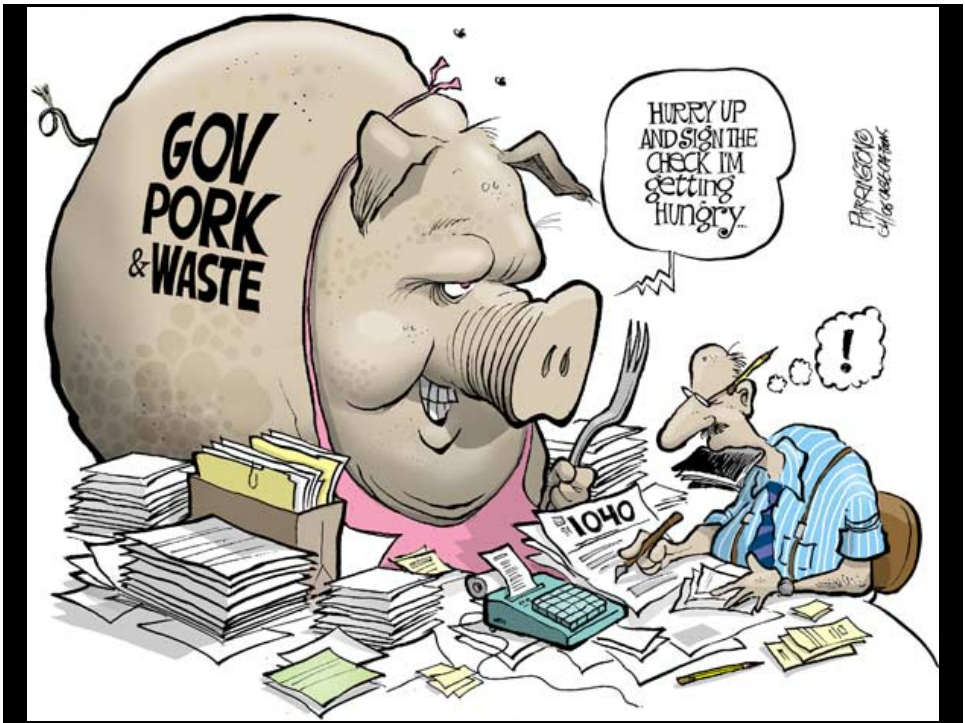
## A Shared Cultural Joke

"More Americans can name the three stooges than the three branches of government.

Well, that's because the three stooges are more likely to get something done." - *David Letterman*



What People  
Think of Government:  
Default Responses



## **The Challenge**

- Dominant and Resilient images consistently misdirect thinking.
- Concrete images of the systems and structures of government are missing.
- Consumerist thinking narrows understanding and responsibility.

## **The Good News**

- The “idea” of government is not lost
- Responsible citizenship is still valued
- A desire for collective action, respecting consensus, and problem-solving
- Stewardship and planning for the future – roles for government

## Just Politics



"Bi-Partisan"  
Steve Benezue



## Mission and Purpose

### Mission & Purpose



### VALUES

- Common Good
- Quality of Life
- Community Wellbeing
- Public Purpose

### ROLE

- Protector
- Manager & Planner
- Steward
- Consensus-BUILDER



## Values Matter

- We reason first from deeply held values.
- Values help answer: “Why does this matter to me/us?”
- We need to start with **Values**, not with the policy and program details

## Why does this matter?

“Every child should have access to immunizations but too many families in our community are not bringing their children in to our clinics. This is why we are proposing a new agency rule requiring more clinic hours . . .”

## Speak to Values First

"The health of the whole community is **protected** when we ensure that our children are immunized. One of the ways we do this is through **our public health agencies** that provide free and low cost **immunizations for all children**. We need extended clinic hours to keep up with growing demands. "

### Mindless Bureaucracy



### Systems and Structures

## Systems & Structures



- Concrete and vivid images
- The public systems we have created
- How they work
- Why they are important

## Government as our Public Structures

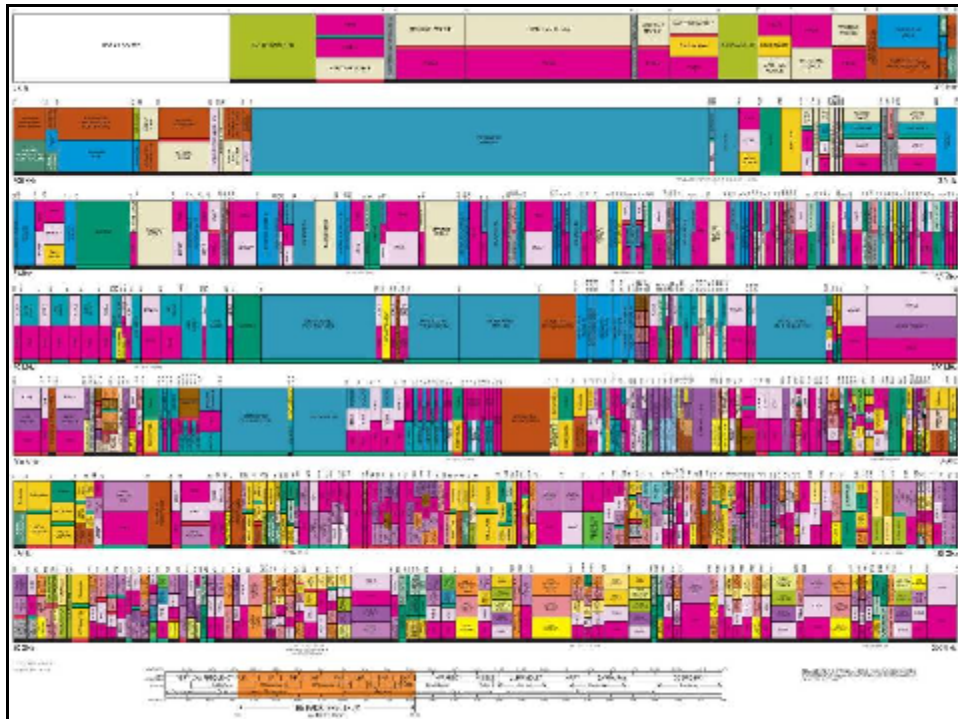
... the main advantages that make America so successful come from the **Public Structures** it has created

... these Public Structures include the *physical* structures (highways, airports, and communications grids) and the *organizational* structures (the postal system, courts) we need to get things done, and the *social* support systems that help to ensure the health and well-being of our communities

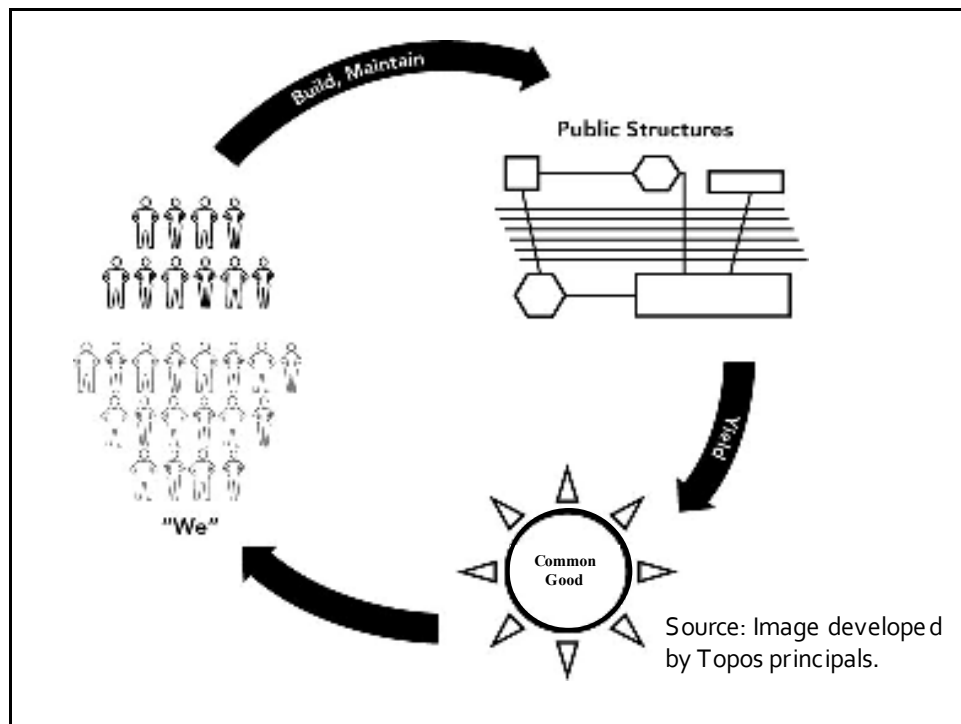
... it is our **well-functioning and supported** Public Structures that are essential for overall success ...

## Responses to the Public Structures description –

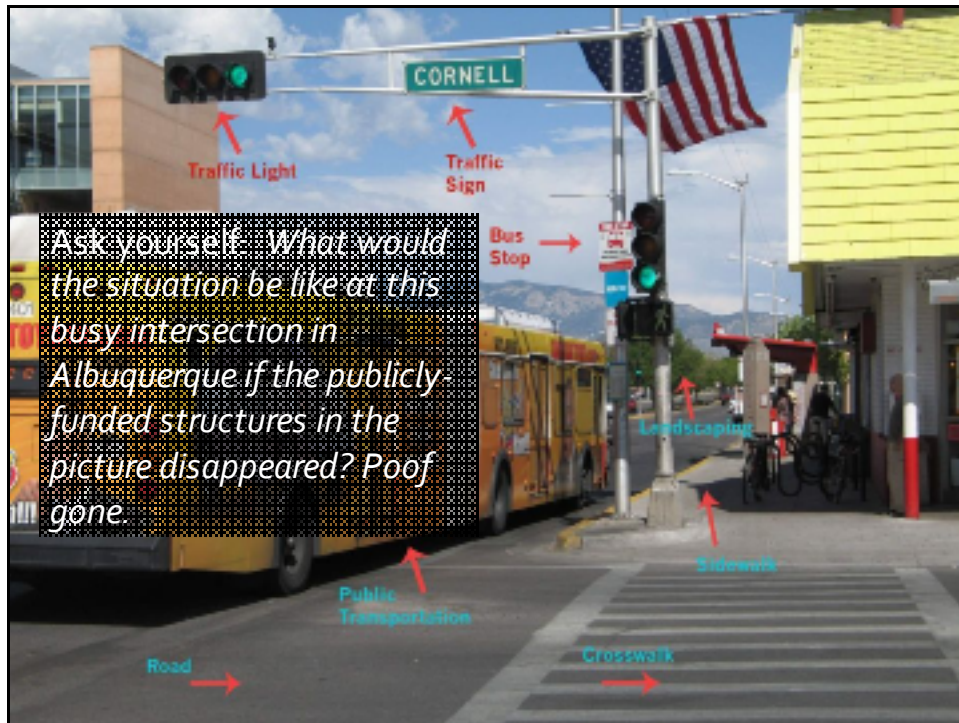
- What are they?
- Why are they important?
- Can you name some of the important public structures we rely on?







Social Security is one the best examples of how we as Americans have created a **public structure** that **benefits us all**. Through this one accomplishment, we virtually eliminated poverty among senior citizens. By **pooling our efforts and sharing risk**, we **protect everyone's quality of life** as we age and retire.



## Consumer Stance

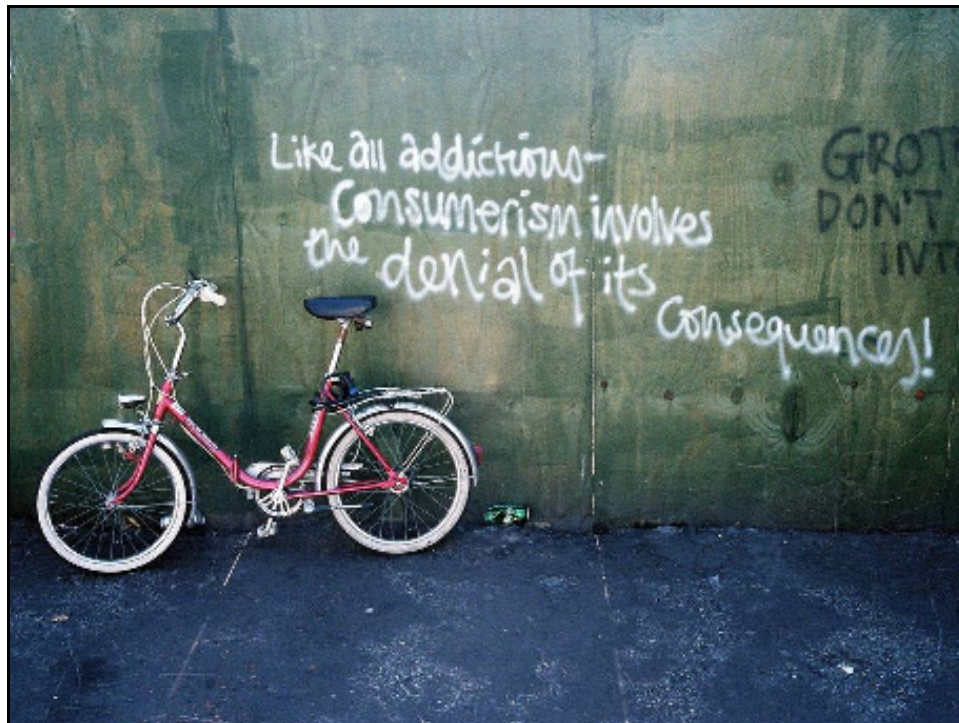


## Our Government

What's in it for me, and what is it going to cost?



## Citizen Stance



## **"Responsibility"**

- **Consumer Stance**
  - Responsibility for **Me**
- **Altruistic Stance**
  - Responsibility for **Them**
- **Citizen/Manager Stance**
  - Responsibility for **It/Us**

## Citizen Thinking



- Interdependence
- Working together
- Problem-solving
- Everyone has a role to play
- “Our” Government
- The Common Interest

## Dominant Stories



Just Politics



Bureaucracy



Vending Machine

*...can't solve anything . . . not my responsibility*

## New Stories



Mission & Purpose



Systems & Structures



Citizen-Thinking

*... our tool for solutions & the common good ...*

State Budget  
& Tax  
Debates are  
Crucibles  
for Attitudes  
about  
Government







## Government Hurdles in Talking about Taxes

### Dominant Images

- Government as only “those” partisan, bickering elected officials.
- Government as a dimly understood but vividly imagined bureaucratic blob.
- Government a Vending Machine – Consumer stance.

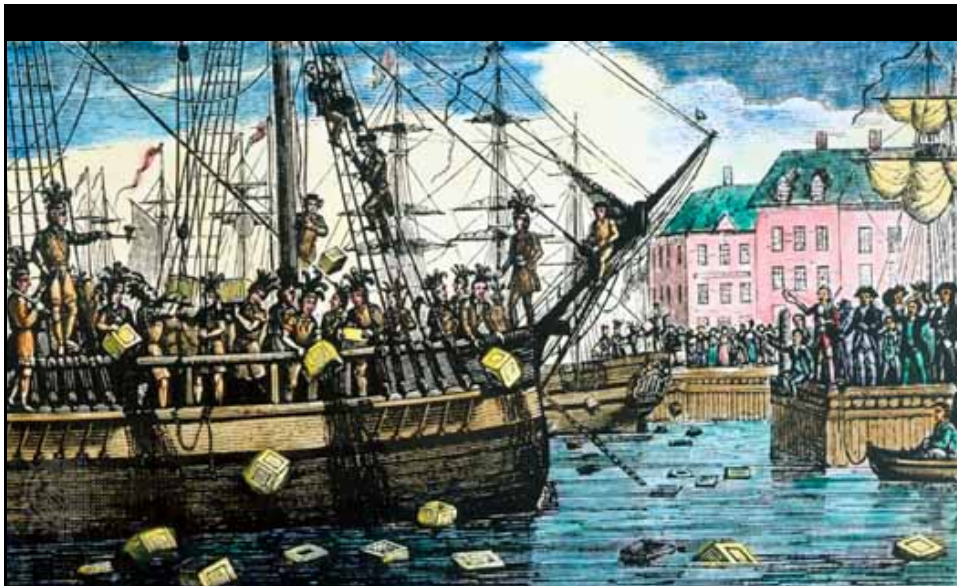
### Implications for Taxes

- Paid to those “corrupt and incompetent” individuals.
- Swallowed and wasted by the invisible, inefficient blob.
- What’s in it for me? I want to keep “my” money.



**"Legitimacy and a steady source of revenue provide the twin foundations of any enduring government."**

- Marjorie E. Kornhauser – "Legitimacy and the Right of Revolution: The Role of Tax Protests and Anti-Tax Rhetoric in America"



**Boston Tea Party - 1773**



San Diego – April 11, 2009



## Government Legitimacy and Anti-Tax Rhetoric

- Tax Revolts and their overheated rhetoric transform government from “we the people” into “them,” the “other” – the taker of our money.
- Getting back to Government as “us” - as our tool for getting things done is essential to winning on taxes.



## The Trouble with Fairness



## Good News

- Most people start out “progressive” in their thinking about taxes.
- Values (Public Good) and a Future Focus help direct thinking to purposes.
- Common Interests – not just self-interests are available and valued.



## Reclaiming the “T” Word

- Lead with **Common Good Values and Objectives** to set up tax conversations
- Focus on **Shared Priorities** and **Goals for the Future** to reconnect Taxes to Purposes
- More **Agency, Transparency and Participation** is needed
- Use a **Pragmatic, Practical Tone** – taxes as tools

## Budget & Tax Narrative in RI

The proposed budget cuts will leave thousands of the most vulnerable among us without the critical government services they need to live, work and thrive. The reason we are in this situation is because we have given tax breaks to the wealthy and are letting big corporations off the hook. We have to restore these budget cuts and get the wealthy and big business to pay their fair share.

## A Better Rhode Island Story

The quality of life we enjoy in Rhode Island is directly connected to the public structures we have created over many decades. Our parks, community colleges, social services and infrastructure have made our small state a good place to live and work. The proposed cuts to state programs and services will undermine the public systems we rely on every day. It is time to focus on finding new revenue to keep our state functioning well, now and into the future.

## Making the Case for Government



- **Values:** Articulate the Public Good behind the policies and programs
- **System Thinking:** Help reveal our essential Public Systems & Structures
- **Awaken the Citizen:** What is our shared stake and responsibility?

**“... A talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change.....”**

**- Richard Rorty**