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## Gazette editorial: A cooperative attitude in a tough budget year

In his final State of the State address, Gov. Tomblin was buoyant, offering cooperation with the Republican-controlled Legislature. He cited positive developments during his tenure:

“Since 2011, we have welcomed more than 250 companies and \$10 billion in major investments, providing hardworking West Virginians with 11,000 good-paying jobs . . . . We overhauled workers’ compensation, and companies operating here have saved more than \$323 million since the program was privatized in 2006.”

He lauded a pending plan to turn a 12,000-acre mountaintop mine on the Boone-Lincoln county line near Corridor G into “the largest industrial site in West Virginia history” — a potential home for dozens of industries and thousands of jobs.

Candidly, Tomblin acknowledged that an “unprecedented shift” has “severely damaged our coal industry, and even the most optimistic among us realize it is unlikely coal will ever reach production levels of the past.”

Decline of coal tax revenue, plus more than \$200 million in business tax cuts, plus other losses, have left the state with an \$820 million budget gap in this year’s and next year’s budgets.

To offset the shortfall, the governor proposed increasing the state cigarette tax to \$1, which would raise an estimated \$71.5 million — and applying 6 percent sales tax to telephone service of all types, which would bring \$60 million more.

Although both those increases are wise — and the tobacco tax should be more, to save teens from deadly nicotine addiction — simple arithmetic indicates they won’t be enough to produce a required balanced budget.

Meanwhile, GOP leaders object to any tax hikes of any type. House Majority Leader Daryl Cowles, R-Morgan, said Republicans should “streamline government” to overcome the \$820 million gap. That’s ominous. Does he intend to slash state troopers, mine safety inspections, road repairs, school lunches and other vital services?

Delegate Don Perdue, D-Wayne, commented: “I’m not sure how we cut spending with the challenges we have. We’ve got to repurpose the state, and the Republicans’ mantra continues to be that we can do that without raising taxes.”

Already, conservatives are pursuing hard-right goals such as pistol-carrying without permits — and a right-to-work law designed to destroy organized labor. Unions have shrunk to a mere 6 percent of private-sector employment in America, so it’s odd that Republicans want to punish them further.

The coming 60 days of the 2016 legislative session may be a stormy time, and the worse for West Virginians if their elected representatives don’t realize, as the governor does, that the people need their state to function well, carry out its duties and pay its bills.