

## His View: Washington's I-732 is carbon-based tax reform

By Rob Briggs | Posted: Monday, September 28, 2015 12:00 am

"I'm sorry, you have to leave."

The instruction was polite yet firm.

I protested lamely, "But I'm in a public place. And this is grassroots democracy."

She was unmoved.

I was being ejected from the chili line at Pullman's National Lentil Festival for gathering signatures for Initiative 732 to the Washington legislature. I considered ignoring the instruction.

I envisioned the headline: "Confused senior arrested at Lentil Festival over crackpot ballot initiative."

But I-732 is anything but crackpot.

You may have heard of Adam Smith's "invisible hand." It's the idea that when individuals make free-market decisions, they also benefit society, as if guided by an invisible hand. The idea underpins our economic system. But when market signals are inaccurate, the invisible hand can take us to a bad place.

I-732 puts a fee on energy sold in the state of Washington based on the amount of carbon pollution it produces. It gets Adam Smith's invisible hand back to work creating a clean, low-carbon economy, while fending off the heavier-handed regulatory policies favored by Washington's environmental establishment.

I-732 imposes a fee of \$25 per ton of carbon dioxide, or about 25 cents per gallon of gasoline. All revenue is returned to Washingtonians. The state's sales tax is reduced by one cent and Business and Occupation taxes on manufacturers are effectively eliminated. It also funds the low-income Working Families Rebate, which reduces inequity in Washington's tax code. The state legislature passed the measure in 2008 but never funded it. Agricultural energy use is mostly exempted, as farmers generally are unable to pass on



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higher production costs.

Think of I-732 as tax reform. It raises taxes on something we want less of - carbon pollution - and lowers taxes on things we want more of - goods and services, manufacturing jobs, and working families.

The smoke-filled air at this year's festival filled me with distress. There's a ticking time bomb hanging over our farming communities and traditions, including this wonderful end-of-summer event.

Lentils have found a special niche here on the Palouse. They thrive in cool weather and tolerate our dry summers. The earth has warmed 1.5 degrees Fahrenheit due to carbon-fuel emissions. Scientists project another 10 degrees warming during the lives of our youngest current farmers. Will the Lentil Festival survive? Perhaps it will move to spring or import the lentils from Canada.

This year, Republicans in Olympia blocked climate legislation. Their position is that "warming from human generated greenhouse gases has yet to be proven." This is a red herring. Mathematicians prove things; scientists do not. Even courts of law don't "prove" things, but rather find them to be true beyond a reasonable doubt - a threshold passed by the science of human-caused global warming decades ago. The real job of legislators is to manage risks for society, making favorable outcomes more likely. Farmers understand risk and buy crop insurance. It's time for us to insure against the enormous risks to our climate.

Fortunately, Washington has an initiative process. Citizens can act responsibly, even if legislators will not. I-732 is a volunteer-driven effort by hundreds of Washingtonians to reduce the risks from global warming, which scientists are convinced will be severe, unless we act.

Shortly after my exchange with Festival organizers, I was approached by a Pullman police officer. He informed me that they had reconsidered; I was free to gather signatures anywhere. I commend festival organizers for their decisive action embracing free speech and for their hard work hosting a great community event.

A happy ending for the climate could begin with Washington voters (and perhaps even our legislators) taking similarly decisive action by embracing this common-sense initiative.

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