What's ailing all levels of WA government: Indulgence, not abundance

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By Alex Fryer

Seattle Times Opinion columnist

These days you need a scorecard to keep track of all the forensic financial examinations, audits and "mea culpas" coming out of state and local government.

Maybe it's telling us something: Our appetite for paying taxes is greater than governments' ability to properly spend the money.

The big talking point in national Democratic circles is the notion of "Abundance," expressed in a book of the same name by journalists Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson. The premise states that we have enough resources to build housing and clean energy projects, it's just that outdated rules and regulations get in the way.

Around here, we suffer from a different affliction that impedes progress: indulgence.

For every problem, we create and pay for another government program. And no matter the results, the budgets just get bigger and bigger.

There's plenty of culprits responsible for this phenomenon, but the negative gravitational force of President Donald Trump cannot be understated. The president is so unpopular around here that folks want to go the other way. And that means voting for progressive candidates who mostly promise bigger government. And yes, the editorial board has endorsed some of these same candidates.

Around Seattle and King County, levy renewals for parks, housing, transportation — even the upcoming Seattle library measure in August — are vastly more expensive than the ones they replace, even counting for inflation. And, to be sure, the editorial board shares in the responsibility. We have endorsed measures for housing and mental health facilities among others.

Where does that get us?

Consider the conundrum of the King County Regional Homelessness Authority.

The RHA was formed in 2019 to combine oversight of emergency homeless services — mostly shelters — into one body that was largely insulated from political pressures and could follow best practices.

An examination of its finances published April 17 showed that the organization with a 2025 budget of $206 million — funded mostly by Seattle and King County taxpayers — did not "identify a Chief Financial Officer role." It bears repeating: a budget of $206 million, no CFO.

No wonder its finances were a mess.

On March 31, King County Executive Girmay Zahilay announced an effort to build 500 units of shelter and housing in 500 days. His office confirmed to the editorial board last month that contracts for emergency shelter would be managed by RHA.

Meanwhile, King County Councilmembers Rod Dembowski and Reagan Dunn want to dissolve the RHA. So does Seattle City Councilmember Maritza Rivera.

If King County changes its mind and pulls out of the RHA, the shelter expansion would be overseen by the Department of Community and Human Services, which is reeling from its own audits showing bad financial practices.

That doesn't seem like much of a choice.

On the other hand, Mayor Katie Wilson said the 500 shelter units she planned to open by next month (so far 75 units have been identified) will be run by the city's Human Services Department, not the RHA.

That's the worst of both possible worlds. Taxpayers end up paying for two bureaucracies doing the same thing. And still, homelessness in the region grows.

On April 22, Wilson and Zahilay released a letter to RHA leadership outlining reforms the authority will be expected to take.

Whatever happens with the RHA, officials need to quickly make decisions and show progress on reducing the number of people living unsheltered.

The big picture is this: It's good that government is taking a hard look at how it's spending public funds. On the other hand, it's troubling that without constant pressure to do better, such damning audits and financial examinations will be routine.

That is the maddening consequence of indulgence.

***Alex Fryer**: afryer@seattletimes.com. Alex Fryer is a member of The Seattle Times editorial board.*