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Editorials

TAX AND SPENDING LIMITS

Colorado's failures send fair warning

Colorado set out 13 years ago to shrink state government. Through a constitutional amendment, voters set the nation's most stringent tax and spending limits.

This week Colorado citizens signaled that their self-imposed girdle had grown uncomfortably tight. They voted 52 percent to 48 percent to suspend the limits for five years, allowing state government to keep a projected \$3.7 billion that otherwise would have been refunded to taxpayers.

The Colorado experience is a cautionary tale for Kansas and Missouri.

Some politicians in both states are interested in tax and spending limits. Legislation calling for a cap has been filed in Kansas and is being pushed by a group called Americans for Prosperity, which backs lower taxes and smaller government.

In Colorado, opponents of the spending limits complained about declining services, even as the state's population boomed. Between 1990 and 2004, for instance, Colorado's ranking dropped from 23rd in the nation to 48th for access to prenatal care. State support for higher education dropped from \$5,365 per student in 2001 to just \$3,511 last year.

Though anti-tax leaders agree the Colorado vote is a blow to the shrink-government movement, some politicians are trying to put the best face on the defeat. Supporters of limits in Kansas say their bill includes an emergency fund and other provisions that would hold government spending to responsible levels but avoid the shrinking effect that created the backlash in Colorado.

The Colorado reversal, however, raises serious questions about the need for artificial spending restraints.

Elected officials have a responsibility to handle the people's money wisely.

They also have a duty to keep the public safe, educate children, maintain roads and look out for vulnerable citizens. Colorado's spending limits failed because government lacked the funds to carry out those tasks.

The message from Colorado is that government matters. Voters want services that are

primarily provided by government.

Citizens should demand fiscal responsibility from their lawmakers. But they shouldn't tie their hands with limits that aren't necessary or wise.