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Give Utahns full picture of tax burden [| Print |](#)

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Utah's state/local tax and fee burden is among the highest in the nation, despite claims to the contrary by the Daily Herald .

The Herald mentions Utah's comparatively low federal tax burden which merely hides our higher-than-average state/local tax and fee burden. Lower taxation at the federal level does not justify higher taxation at state and local levels. Each level of government must be held separately accountable for how our tax dollars are spent.

The Herald mentioned Utah's comparatively low property tax burden but did not mention that Utah's other main taxes are above the national average, including individual income tax (16th highest at 19.1 percent above the national average), gas tax (11th highest at 48.2 percent above the national average), and general sales tax (13th highest at 23.4 percent above the national average).

The Herald also mistakenly argues that tuition paid to public universities should be excluded from tax-and-fee burden comparisons because tuition is "voluntary."

First, fees should be included because there is a direct linkage between decreased reliance on taxes and increased reliance on fees. While increased reliance on user fees makes sense in certain situations, especially if user fees encourage efficient use of resources such as water and transportation, fees should be included in tax burden analyses since governments frequently increase fees in order to avoid increasing taxes.

In recent years, Utah has essentially shifted more of the cost of higher education from general taxes to tuition. Most Utahns are concerned about declining university enrollments as a percent of population, and most policy experts attribute much of this decline to increasing tuition costs.

Tuition has increased for several reasons, but one major reason is that the state has made a conscious decision to rely less on general taxes and more on user fees like tuition. In the 1996 fiscal year, tuition accounted for 25 percent of higher education revenues. In the 2007 fiscal year, that percentage increased to 30 percent. While some may applaud such a shift, government is not really reducing our total burdens when shifting from general taxes to user fees like tuition.

According to the Herald's logic, the state could cut state/local tax burdens by reducing general taxes and increasing "voluntary" fees. Since tuition doesn't "count" as a fee according to the Herald, a reduction in general taxes and a dollar-for-dollar increase in tuition would be a net tax cut according to the Herald.

However, tuition is not the only "voluntary" fee that most Utahns will be paying in future

years. Many new highways may be tolled. Will the Herald also call these "voluntary" fees that should be excluded from our state/local tax and fee burden since no one will be forced to drive on a toll road?

While no one is forced to attend a public university, attending one is the only option for most Utahns who want to attend college. This is especially true since BYU has capped enrollment and draws most of its students from out of state. For most Utahns, attending a public university is only voluntary for those who don't want to attend college in the first place.

Most fees are voluntary to a degree. Impact fees could be argued as "non-mandatory" since people could buy an old house instead of a new one. The same could be said of gas taxes, which are really a fee, since taxpayers could significantly reduce their payment of gas taxes by driving less or by driving a fuel-efficient car. Excluding "voluntary" fees is just an attempt to understate the real size of government burdens. Fees, including tuition, are real fees and should be included.

Fourth, even if The Herald and others want to call fees like tuition "voluntary," government still has a responsibility to keep fees under control.

When calculating state/local tax and fee burdens, the Utah Taxpayers Association pioneered the idea of calculating several tax burden measures. Some measures include tuition, and other measures exclude tuition. The purpose for excluding tuition in one measure was to demonstrate the effect that Utah's unique demographics have on the tax and fee burden, not to minimize the amount of taxes and fees that Utahns pay.

Nevertheless, despite Utah's unique demographic challenges, tax and fee burdens should be accurately reported and not intentionally understated, and the most accurate measure is one that includes so-called "voluntary" fees.

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[Close Window](#)