

Taxing Muni Bonds: Excuses, Excuses, and More Excuses

Posted on May 11, 2017 by John Godfrey, APPA



By John Godfrey, Senior Government Relations Director, American Public Power Association

In politics and policy there are reasons and there are excuses.

The American Public Power Association and other stakeholders have been fighting for several years now to explain the reasons why an unprecedented tax on municipal bonds would be bad. There is ample evidence to indicate that:

- The tax exclusion of municipal bonds is far more efficient than opponents suggest;
- Taxing municipal bonds would be hugely harmful to U.S. infrastructure investment; and
- Proposed alternatives to tax-exempt municipal bond financing would increase the cost of financing core infrastructure investments — and state and local residents will pay the price

I also believe a federal tax on municipal bond interest would be unconstitutional.

What we've spent less time discussing are the excuses – implicit and explicit – for imposing a new tax on municipal bonds. These include dire warnings of tidal waves of municipal bankruptcies,

breathless tales of state and local financial struggles, hoary anecdotes implying endless abuses, and pat solutions that fail to address the problems.

I discuss the excuses in a recent article for Tax Notes magazine, [Logical Fallacies in the Debate of Municipal Bonds](#).

For example, in Washington, it's common to cite a handful of municipal bankruptcies to imply that many more have happened or are about to. This alleged symptom of fiscal negligence is taken as an excuse to "rein in" state and local spending by imposing a federal tax on infrastructure investments.

As the article explains, though, in the last three decades there have been just 47 municipal bankruptcies or attempted bankruptcies – from a population of 39,000 municipal governments. In the early nineties the rate averaged roughly one per year, and in the last two decades it has averaged roughly two per year. That's not "nothing," but it's also not a tsunami, and it certainly doesn't justify upending more than a century of tax policy by repealing the federal tax exclusion for municipal bond interest.

If anything, economic data shows that state and local governments are doing a far better job of tackling fiscal challenges than the federal government. There are exceptions — again, two bankruptcies a year is not nothing. However, headlines screaming of budget wars may actually be a good sign that state and local governments are actually fighting to make tough budget choices, rather than simply fiddling while their fiscal houses burn down.

My article also debunks the idea that debate over tax-exempt bonds is somehow a debate over tax-exempt bond financing of sports stadiums (or that the debate over private activity bonds has something to do with private activity bond financing of a Corvette museum).

Read the full article on [Logical Fallacies in the Debate of Municipal Bonds](#) by clicking [HERE](#).

[here](#)