

## **Opponent of higher taxes spurs protest**

Norquist meets with Fletcher, GOP

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<http://www.courier-journal.com/localnews/2005/01/07ky/B4-notax01070-9463.html>

Friday, January 07, 2005

FRANKFORT, Ky. — A leading national opponent of higher taxes met privately yesterday with Gov. Ernie Fletcher and Republican lawmakers, and was booed by supporters of higher funding for education and services for the needy.

Grover Norquist, founder and president of Americans for Tax Reform, said his trip to Kentucky was one of many he takes to meet with supporters and signers of a pledge that they will not vote to raise taxes. Fletcher has signed the pledge.

But Norquist's visit cost him one state legislator who signed earlier. Rep. Steve Nunn, R-Glasgow, said yesterday he wrote a letter withdrawing the pledge he signed in 1990 in his first House race.

"Considering the fiscal crisis we're in, I had to rescind it. That pledge takes away an official's independence to make decisions based on current circumstances," Nunn said. "And with a huge deficit in Medicaid and problems funding other programs, I believe we need a tax bill that raises at least \$250million a year in new revenue."

Norquist had left by the time Nunn disclosed his withdrawal.

With Nunn's defection, 33 members of the 100-seat House and 16 members of the 38-seat Senate have signed the pledge. One Senate seat is under challenge.

Norquist's visit comes at the start of a legislative session that will take up state budget and tax reform bills that failed last year.

Fletcher has said he will propose a tax plan similar to the one he offered then but was rejected by House Democrats. That included a proposed increase in Kentucky's 3-cents-a-pack cigarette tax, the nation's lowest.

Last year, Fletcher sought to increase the cigarette tax by 26cents a pack, to 29cents. But he told the Rotary Club of Louisville yesterday the tax needs to be even higher.

"I'd like to push it more toward the 40 cents (increase) because I think that we ought to get that through the legislature," Fletcher said.

Last night in an impromptu interview, Fletcher said he had not yet decided on a 40-cent increase. "I haven't arrived at a number," he said. "I've just said one thing I think we can do is get near 40 cents."

Norquist, who said he requested the meeting with Fletcher, said they did not discuss the details of the governor's revised tax plan. "I just stated my support for his effort to

have a revenue-neutral tax reform," Norquist said.

Norquist said an elected official would not violate the no-tax pledge by supporting a revenue-neutral plan that raises some taxes, cuts some taxes and overall does not raise additional revenue in its first year. He said Fletcher assured him that his revised plan will be revenue-neutral.

Norquist said his organization has no position on casinos and gambling, another issue that Kentucky lawmakers are likely to consider this session. He said it would not break the pledge to vote to expand gambling.

After meeting with the governor, Norquist held a news conference attended by about 70 people — many wearing T-shirts that said, "I'm not neutral about Kentucky. Why is the governor?"

Steve Boyce, a retired Berea College math professor, said the protest involved a coalition known as the Kentucky Economic Justice Alliance that supports better funding for the needy.

"What we would want to say to the governor, more than anything else, is at this point in Kentucky's history it's just irresponsible to enter into this rare and precious opportunity for tax reform by saying it has to be revenue-neutral," Boyce said.

A few protesters challenged Norquist.

"Over the last couple of months we've all heard how the past election was a triumph of moral values. I want to know what is so moral about your policies that wreak havoc on public schools, that eliminate services that are necessary for children like my 4-year-old son?" asked Kimberly Wolf of Lexington, a member of the Economic Justice Alliance.

Norquist said the effects of higher taxes on families must be considered.

"I would certainly argue that letting people control their own lives and their own resources and taking care of their own families is, of course, a moral thing to do," he said.

Rep. Kathy Stein, D-Lexington, told Norquist she thought it was irresponsible to inject himself into Kentucky's tax debate just as relations seem to have improved between Democrats who control the House and Republicans who control the Senate.

"Why in the world would you charge into Kentucky at this very critical time when we are trying to deal with budgetary issues and inject this kind of malevolence?" she asked.

Norquist said he is free to advocate his views whenever he chooses.

Roger Holsey, a self-employed painter from Lexington, said he showed up to protest because Norquist is "not giving the whole story. He's not talking about the needs."

Norquist said elected officials fall into two groups — those who make tough decisions about setting priorities and cutting unneeded spending, and those who "think governing is too difficult" and push taxes as the solution.

He said states can spend more for pressing needs by cutting middle management and by seeing if the private sector can provide some services cheaper than state workers.

Asked where Kentucky should cut costs, he said, "I would defer to policy experts from Kentucky on specifics."

After the news conference, Norquist met with groups of Republican legislators.

Senate Minority Leader Ed Worley of Richmond said later that the visit was counterproductive to reaching bipartisan budget and tax compromises.

"Here is the man who gave a famous quote that he wanted to shrink the size of government so he could drown it in a bathtub," Worley said. "I'm a conservative Democrat and I don't believe we should raise taxes, but we can't drown government in a bathtub unless we ignore important services like police protection, education and helping people in need."

But Rep. Ken Upchurch, the House Republican whip from Monticello who met with Norquist and has signed the no-tax pledge, said, "I think to say that this visit caused any trouble is an overreaction. But I'm not surprised some people say so — people who never see a tax they don't like."

Fletcher said last night that Norquist "just wanted to come down and encourage us along." He said he saw no problem with the visit.

Staff writer Marcus Green contributed to this story.

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