

In 2019, when the Utah Legislature considered increasing the state’s food tax as part of a larger scheme to cut income taxes, I became an advocate. I joined hundreds of others across Utah, a group with wide-ranging political views, to gather signatures opposing the regressive tax change.

Fortunately, the Legislature finally listened. After passing the unpopular tax reform package that included an increased food tax, only to face a backlash of angry citizens mobilizing a repeal eﬀort, the Legislature repealed the whole tax proposal.

But Utah’s existing tax on food, even at its lower rate of 1.75% compared to the full 4.85%sales tax rate, is still wrong. It disproportionately hurts low-income Utahns and contributes to food insecurity. Nearly 1 in 5 Utah households experienced food insecurity over the last year, meaning they lacked consistent access to enough food for every person in their household to live an active, healthy life.

This is why now, as a legislator, I am sponsoring a bill to eliminate the state portion of the sales tax on food.

The sales tax on food is unfair because food is such a big part of the family budget for low-income and working families. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service, low-income families pay 36% of their income on food while higher-income families spend only 8%.

Taxing grocery food is a stable source of revenue for the state, which is why some economists like it. But the basic unfairness of taxing a necessity like food makes the sales tax on food very unpopular. Thirty-seven states do not charge any sales tax on food. If Utah voters had their way, Utah would join those states and stop charging a sales tax on food purchases. Polling on the 2019 proposal to increase the sales tax on food showed that 67% of Utah voters opposed the idea.

When Jon Huntsman Jr. successfully ran for governor in 2004, he campaigned on abolishing the food tax. “Sales tax on food is one of the most regressive taxes in our society. It especially hurts seniors on fixed incomes and working families,” he said then. This is still true today, and people know it.

My legislative colleagues have begun considering tax cuts in the upcoming session. Utah has one of the most robust economies in the country and is on track to earn $3 billion more in tax revenue than last year. This will result in more than a billion-dollar surplus. If my legislative colleagues want to really help the Utahns who need it most, cutting the food tax is the way to go.

Cities and counties in Utah are allowed to levy their own local sales taxes on grocery food, and my bill would not change that. The state currently earns close to $149 million from its 1.75% sales tax on food. The state can aﬀord to let Utah families keep this portion of their hard-earned incomes.

Now is the time to take action to repeal the state’s unfair sales tax on food. As we move beyond a very diﬃcult chapter in our state’s history, with the pandemic — hopefully —in the rearview mirror, the Legislature can aﬀord to take this equitable and moral step forward.

*Rep. Rosemary Lesser, a Democrat, represents House District 10 in the Ogden area.*

*https://www.deseret.com/opinion/2021/10/21/22736940/utah-legislature-food-tax-sales-tax-poor-regressive-abolish*