

## FEDERAL BUDGET

# Tough choices

**C**ongress spent so much time gnashing its teeth over earmarks that the sound and fury largely signifies nothing.

The fact is, earmarks are a fraction of the federal budget.

A large portion of the budget is devoted to entitlements — Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid — that are considered untouchable.

If today's present course is not changed, the General Accountability Office reports, here are the alternatives:

- Cut total federal spending by 60 percent.

- Raise federal taxes by 2½ times today's level.

That is why it is refreshing to see two Republican legislators being true to their principles and calling for major decisions before they become even more painful.

So Rep. Frank Wolf, R-Va., is continuing to propose a federal commission modeled in large part on the Base Realignment and Closure Commission. The idea is that hard decisions are too difficult for politicians and must be delegated.

Wolf and Sen. George Voinovich, R-Ohio, have introduced identical bills to establish a national bipar-

tisan commission that would put everything — all federal spending and tax programs on the table. It's called the SAFE Commission and has been supported by groups across the political divide.

As Wolf said on the floor of the House, "America is living on borrowed dollars and borrowed time.

U.S. spending is outpacing income growth and personal savings rates have dropped to negative 1.3 percent in the first quarter."

The SAFE Commission would address the big problems with big solutions, a major reform of the tax code, for instance. Something like the Fair Tax is needed to simplify the tax code rather than complicate it, as with the president's latest

health care proposal.

The tax code also should be designed to encourage savings and investment, because the private economy is the engine that provides the tax revenues.

As for entitlements, the costs must be reduced. That can best be done by demanding personal responsibility and providing choices to consumers.

We know this train is coming, but we refuse to get off the tracks.

### SAFE COMMISSION

#### How it would work

- A bipartisan group would address the coming federal budget crisis.
- Everything will be on the table: taxes, spending, entitlements.
- A national dialogue would be undertaken.
- With a bipartisan 75 percent vote, the commission will send to Congress a package. Congress and administration would have to either accept it or provide an equivalent proposal.