

Give me liberty, or give me ... some free stuff?



It was a crisp, sunny, fall day in 1999.

I cruised into Champaign-Urbana on east-bound Interstate 74 in my Honda

Accord on the way to a business meeting. Spotting my exit, I glanced in the rearview mirror, signaled and changed lanes.

Cherry tops.

Had I been 19 years old on a Saturday night, I might have worried. Heck, who am I kidding, I'd have panicked.

At 39, conscience clear, I exited.

The cherry tops trailed.

I pulled onto the shoulder expecting them to blur past.

Nope.

Befuddled, "Mike-at-19" flashbacks streaming, I took a deep breath, lowered the window, put my hands on the wheel, and stared into the driver's side mirror as a broad-shouldered policeman ambled over.

"License and registration, please."

"Sure."

"Stay in your vehicle," he said.

After running my license, he returned.

"Mr. Pemberton, I expect you're wondering why I

pulled you over?"

"Yes, sir."

"Step out of the vehicle."

We walked to the rear of the car. We did not have a dog at the time, but the Chevy Chase, "Vacation," scene wormed its way into my mind.

No dog leash dangling from the bumper, the broad-shouldered cop pointed at my license plate.

I shrugged, palms up.

"The renewal sticker for your plates, Mr. Pemberton. It expired a few weeks ago," he said, jerking a ticket book from his jacket. "I'm sorry, but I gotta write this up."

So I smiled when reading the headline "License plate fines rake in cash" in the April 2 News-Gazette. The article detailed how the state "decision to stop mailing renewal reminders" for license plates has resulted in \$5 million in fines recently, more than double from the same time period a year ago.

The notifications cost the state \$450,000 a month to mail, and with no budget and no means to pay for the reminders, the state stopped mailing them. Add those savings to the amount collected in fines and the state has collected a tidy sum.

My thoughts: "Good!"

I know, I know. I can hear

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the hullabaloo all the way in Hoopeston. But let's think this through.

Illinois is broke. Bankrupt. DOA. Stick a fork in it. Nada. Pick your euphemism.

There are many reasons why and many folks in Springfield, past and present, to blame. But what about us? The individual citizen. Do we need the state to spend \$5.4 million a year to remind us to renew our license plates? Can we not walk around to the rear of the car, note the date, stick it on our calendar and pay the fee when it comes due?

Joseph C. Steinberg, in the article "The Free Stuff Major-

ity," in the April 1 Wall Street Journal, noted that, "We may think that government spending in general is bad ... but by golly the spending that benefits us personally is indispensable."

If only the quote was an April Fools' Day joke.

Although I believe in a social safety net, I'm no big government guy. I'm self-employed and write checks monthly for payroll taxes, quarterly for state and federal income taxes and annually for commercial and personal property taxes. I wonder how much better off my family, friends, neighbors and all citizens might be financially without the local, state and federal government's insatiable appetite for, and wasteful management of, taxpayer money.

My money. Your money. Not their money.

And, yeah, I doubt the state can justify charging drivers over \$100 for license plates other than the fact they need money from every conceivable source they can think of to support their irresponsible spending and administration. Which, of course, they'll never admit. But they know raising "fees" does not generally engender taxpayer angst and create bold-print headlines.

Folks may grumble. But, "You gotta have plates, right?" So we pay the fee.

Or don't, apparently, unless we receive a reminder from the state.

How many of us who grouse about the "Nanny state" are also members of the "Free Stuff Majority?" Like kindergarten, admonished every day to "pick up your toys," we insist we be reminded, at a cost of \$5.4 million, to pay a fee that is due the same time every year.

I say to the state, even when we have a budget (yes, I'm an eternal optimist), don't send any license plate renewal letters. Save the \$5.4 million, collect the overdue fines just like the library does and hold people accountable.

Not only will taxpayers save the \$5.4 million, but my guess is we'll pay less in fines every year.

Why am I so sure about the fine decline?

Because, I paid that fine. Once.

I've not missed a license renewal since.

Mike Pemberton, a novelist and English teacher with Danville Area Community College, lives in Hoopeston and can be contacted at www.mikepembertonbooks.com.