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rather than freezing spending to bring the budget into balance, spent \$400 million more than the legislature passed.

Gov. Tom Wolf and myriad special interest groups have repeatedly called on House leaders to vote to raise taxes to balance the budget.

Without another tax hike, which would be the fifth state tax increase in nine years, these groups--many funded by government unions--stroke fears of credit downgrades or "draconian cuts" to popular programs. Raising taxes, they say, represents "responsible governing," and the only way to balance the state budget is to take more from families and businesses. Don't believe them.

Admittedly, the budget process has been frustrating. By passing a spending plan with no plan to pay for it, the legislature created a recipe for disaster. Then Gov. Wolf ignored his legal obligation to use his veto pen to ensure spending matched revenues. Of course, this is just a repeat of last year's fiasco. The legislature passed an unbalanced budget, then facing pressure, enacted a \$650 million tax hike. But these taxes didn't fix the budget problem--they contributed to slow economic growth, causing a large revenue shortfall. And Gov. Wolf,

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Now, the state faces a \$1.6 billion 2016-17 budget shortfall and a projected \$600 million budget gap for 2017-18. Yet, contrary to [claims](#) that lawmakers have "exhausted all of the options" and "shaken out the couch cushions" to close the gap, behind state government's "couch" hides \$11 billion dollars in government slush funds. To put this in perspective, \$11 billion is more than one-third of the entire General Fund budget. This is money Pennsylvanians have already paid in taxes that's been stashed in off-book government savings accounts.

How is this possible? The state's General Fund represents just 40 percent of total state spending. The remaining 60 percent (nearly \$50 billion dollars annually) is off-book in a largely unknown and rarely scrutinized "shadow budget." This budget includes more than 150 other state funds, each with its own checking and savings accounts.

As of July 31, these accounts held more than \$11 billion--easily enough close the existing *and* projected budget shortfalls many times over. The idea that our choice is between tax hikes and a budget deficit is a false premise. House Majority Leader Dave Reed was right in [saying](#), "Why would we take a broad-based tax like that and put it on every consumer when there are alternatives that are out there?" Lawmakers can use tax dollars the government has already collected, but hasn't spent, to close the budget gap. And that's exactly what some lawmakers hope to do.

Many have erroneously criticized House members for doing nothing in recent weeks, claiming they've been essentially vacationing while the budget sits in limbo. The truth is, [House members have been working diligently](#) to balance the budget without tax increases--by putting plush government slush funds to good use.

The Senate-passed tax hike, which passed by the slimmest of margins, would take another \$570 million out of the economy--impacting nearly every family with higher heating, electric, and telephone bills. This tax hikes would result in the loss of thousands of jobs across Pennsylvania, exacerbating the state's long-term challenges. The House must show leadership and stand up for all Pennsylvanians whose own budgets hang in the balance.

In addition to tapping the shadow budget slush funds, balancing the budget requires recurring revenues and long term reform. Gambling expansion has long been part of the discussion, and it passed both the House and Senate in different forms. These disagreements between the House and Senate should not derail the process--particularly when solutions that avoid harmful tax increases on families and job creators are on the table.

Lawmakers must also resolve to control state government's spending addiction and ensure next year's budget lives within Pennsylvanians means. Meaningful reforms must be included in the final revenue plan to fix our long-term structural deficit. This should include privatizing the state's liquor monopoly, requiring work for able-bodied welfare recipients to promote the transition from dependence to self-sufficiency, and reprioritizing spending from the shadow budget. Lawmakers face a choice between raising taxes on working families--again--or tapping government slush funds and enacting real reforms. The choice is simple. -- [Op-ed in pennlive.com by Nathan Benefield, VP & COO for the Commonwealth Foundation, a conservative think-tank in Harrisburg; also see another pennlive op-ed, "Here's how to get Pa. out of its budget doldrums"](#)

Have you heard that old rule about never going to the supermarket when you're hungry?

The same concept applies to political candidates speaking to opposition "trackers" while annoyed. State Sen. Scott Wagner, a York County Republican running for governor, was attending the Pittston Tomato Festival in Luzerne County on Saturday when a tracker from the Pennsylvania Democratic Party started filming him in the crowd.

Wagner, who just that day had [published an op-ed on pennlive.com](#), knocking Democrats for suggesting he was too slow to respond to the violence sparked by a white-supremacist march in Charlottesville, Va., on Aug. 12, started talking about George Soros, the billionaire conservatives love to hate for making major financial donations to liberal political campaigns. Wagner, in the video, called Soros a "Hungarian Jew" who "made a fortune" but has a "hatred for America." "This is exactly what they want," a staffer told Wagner. "You're just feeding into his bull--."

This is not Wagner's first tangle with a tracker. He snatched a camera from a tracker from American Bridge 21st Century in May, setting off a controversy. Wagner said that tracker was trespassing in a private country club. American Bridge said Wagner assaulted its tracker. The state Attorney General's Office said ["both men acted inappropriately"](#) and dropped the matter.

The liberal-leaning American Bridge received \$4 million from Soros from 2012 to 2015 and \$80,000 two weeks after Wagner's run-in with the group's tracker. We asked Wagner why he engages with trackers,

who are always on the lookout for a slipup. “This can be really vicious and brutal,” Wagner said. “I’m trying to bring a little humor into it.”

By calling Soros a Hungarian Jew? How often does Wagner, a millionaire who runs a trucking and waste-hauling company, get called a York County German American? Wagner, 61, offered plenty of evidence that he is not anti-Semitic, describing his decades of involvement in and financial donations to a York Jewish community center, where he learned to swim when he was 5. He came up short on explaining why he claims Soros, an American citizen since 1961, hates this country.

Wagner, who said he has made more than \$1 million in political donations, acknowledged that he and Soros both came from humble beginnings, became wealthy, and now use their money to support people for public office. Wagner, a big fan of President Trump, even conceded that the arc of his business success more closely matches Soros’ career than that of Trump, born to a wealthy New York family running a real estate business. But why claim Soros hates America? “We have very different, polar-opposite beliefs,” Wagner finally offered. – *Philadelphia Daily News*

Sen. Lindsey Graham said Thursday that President Trump “should stop watching cable television” and continue pushing his agenda through Congress. “Nobody else watches it. You know, he called me up one night at about 11:00, and I said what are you doing, and he said you’ve got to turn on the TV. This guy just said this. And I said Mr. President, you’re watching MSNBC at 11:00. If you stop watching it, their audience goes down by half,” Mr. Graham, South Carolina Republican, said on “The Hugh Hewitt Show.” “It’s all a game. It’s all about ratings. It’s all about making money. It’s all about, you know, people feeling, you know, like they have something in common with somebody, this validation of feelings. Stop watching cable TV, and you know, come up with an agenda and stick to it,” he added.

Mr. Graham, who has been a critic of Mr. Trump at times, also commented on the president’s negative tweets about Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, explaining that the remarks come out of frustration with a lack of progress, especially on health care. “For seven years, we promised to repeal and replace. You just can’t move on and say all right, well, we tried our best when we have not. But Mitch is very strong in the conference. People support him as our leader. And we’re all dealing with President Trump the best way we can, and he is frustrated about not fulfilling promises. So am I. Let’s take another shot at health care,” Mr. Graham said.

The president tweeted his frustration with Mr. McConnell again on Thursday morning. “The only problem I have with Mitch McConnell is that, after hearing Repeal & Replace for 7 years, he failed! That should NEVER have happened!” he **tweeted**. – *Washington Times*

