47th KZGN News Talking Points Editorial

Should low-income people pay lower fines for tickets and other violations, than the rest of the people?

Just to recap yesterday, KZGN did a news story as follows: Governor Brown has come up with a new proposal to reduce traffic fines and penalties for low-income people. He says this is based on the harsh lessons of the confrontation between the citizens and police. Gov. Brown is proposing amnesty for poor people buried under the escalating costs of unpaid traffic fines. Underlining charges that the state has been exploiting low-income and minority residents caught in a spiraling accumulation of court costs that they can’t pay.

Governor Brown proposes to start an 18-month amnesty program in October so that drivers with lesser infractions would pay half of what they owe while administrative fees for lingering offenses would be cut from $300 to $50. Officials note violators’ problems become compounded with unpaid fines and penalties that lead to suspended licenses and registrations.

So, let me get this straight. Under Brown’s proposal, if you break the law for certain things, if you are low income, then you pay a lower penalty? Does this sound right to anyone? I’m sure for some of you, it probably sounds ok. If someone makes less, then the maybe should pay less. So, how do we determine the levels? Would it be right to say a $300 fine for most of us should be $50 for low income? How do we determine what income level this lower rate kicks in at? Just for discussion, let’s say it kicks in to all those already receiving public assistance? So, a person making $25k per year get his fine reduced from $300 to $50. But the guy making 25,001 dollars per year, has to pay the 300 dollars. Is that fair? Or do we have a sliding scale to determine fines? That sounds plausible. But, how do we determine that? Will violators have to produce tax returns to show their income level? We all know that just showing a pay stub doesn’t really show what the person has available for expenses. What if 2 people both made 25K per year? And one had almost no expenses because they live at home with their parents, and the next person lives on their own with lots a medical expenses. They are not equal in determining how is low income….are they? What if they said provide your tax return so you can show your adjusted income to determine your ability to pay fines? So, the guy making 25K with no deductions has an adjusted income of 15K. And then compare that to the businessman that has a million dollar per year business, but has a huge loss for the year sending his adjusted income to zero. This does happen, folks.

Just think back to the Howard Buffet story during the last presidential campaign. He criticized the tax system because his secretary paid more in taxes than he did as a multimillionaire. So, will the guy with the million dollar business pay reduced fines?

After all, his actual available income to spend is less than the guy making 35K per year. You might say this is an extreme example. My point is, I wonder how they’ll determine the poverty level to use this program. And then look at the actual reason for penalties to begin with. Aren’t penalties meant to try and keep us from breaking the law? Does Brown really believe that someone that almost gets a slide of the penalty, that this will keep them from breaking the law? Then I have to ask, does brown have the authority to lower fines without the legislature approving this? I thought that only the legislative body can write laws. Or, is this again another over step of the governor’s authority? Seems there are a lot of executive over steps of authority lately. So, all the low income people that has pending fines now. They hear about this proposal for October. So, do they now just stop paying all together and wait until amnesty? Sure why not? This should not be an issue of justice for certain levels of people. Last I heard, we are all equal. Laws are meant to make us behave. Does anyone really think by reducing a fine, that someone will have the same incentive to not break the law? If you break the law, the law is applied to all of us equally. There should be no class of citizen that the laws apply to at a different level. What’s next, reduced jail terms for criminals based on their income level? So, if a low income person can’t pay their speeding ticket, they go to jail for 10 days. But if the next person is determined to not be low income, they go to jail for 30 days? How about we take this to the next level? How about reduced jail terms and fines for burglars, and armed robbers. After all, many of those people may be low income too. That’s why they are robbing to begin with. They are trying to raise their income level. So, will we now reduce their jail time? May sound ridiculous to most of you, but rest assured, there are some out there that probably think that it would be a good thing to do. After all, look how much it costs us to keep a person in jail…….. All this special consideration for law breakers. What about the victims? What about them?

In conclusion, this again is socialism at its finest. This is just plain ridiculous. Remember the saying: “don’t break the law, if you don’t want to do the time”? Laws apply to everyone, equally.

I’m Tom Wiknich, and that’s what I think. I’d like to know what you think. If you have any comments about this editorial, or would like to discuss or recommend a topic, I’d like to hear from you. Please email them to info@kzgn.net.