

Dear Editor,

Seventy-seven Sitka residents participated in the annual Sitka Tax Day penny poll on April 14 to let their federal representatives know how they want their tax dollars spent. The poll, sponsored by Sitkans for Peace and Justice, was designed to engage the community in a discussion of federal budget priorities and trade-offs.

To encourage participation by a broad range of community members, the penny poll was held at Kettleton Memorial Library. Advanced publicity by the Daily Sitka Sentinel and Raven Radio likewise emphasized the inclusive nature of the poll. Participants represented diverse interests, including educators, health care professionals, small business owners and employees, fishermen, public service employees, nonprofit employees, students and retirees.

Penny poll voters were given 10 pennies to distribute among 14 jars, each representing a federal program. An equal number of military and non-military categories were included to mirror the current federal budget, which is split almost evenly between military and non-military programs.

Based on poll results, the federal budget would look very different if residents of Sitka could decide how their federal tax dollars were spent.

Education, healthcare and environmental protection received the highest numbers of votes. The development and production of nuclear weapons, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and support for military bases in foreign countries were the least popular programs.

Penny poll participants allocated only 12% of total budget outlays to military spending, while 88% went to non-military programs. Currently, 47 percent of the President's FY 2013 budget, or \$614 billion, is allocated for military spending, a decrease of 1% from the 2012 numbers. Veterans' benefits garnered the largest number of penny poll votes among military programs (6%). The President's FY 2013 budget includes an 11% increase in Veterans' benefits relative to FY 2012 levels, to \$140 billion.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan received only single penny in the penny poll. The President's FY 2013 budget allocates \$89 billion for the Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan wars, despite the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops from Iraq.

Poll results suggest that Sitkans see national security better served by supporting humanitarian aid programs that increase the health and well-being of people worldwide. Penny poll participants allocated nearly 10 percent of the federal budget for international humanitarian aid. Currently, the United States spends less than 1 percent of its federal budget on poverty-focused assistance to other countries. That makes the U.S. the smallest contributor among major donor governments ([www.care.org](http://www.care.org)). In the President's FY 2013 budget, international humanitarian aid will decrease by 7%. Global health funding will decline by nearly 4%.

The federal budget allocates minuscule funding for arts, humanities and cultural programs. In contrast, arts and culture programs received significant percentages of tax monies from Sitka residents. Poll participants allocated 9% of the federal budget to arts and culture. The Obama Administration's proposed FY 2013 budget calls for a 5% increase in spending for arts and culture, from \$1.5 billion in 2012, to \$1.6 billion. Funding for the National Endowment of the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities will still be well below the \$167.5 million each was set to receive before cuts by Congressional Republicans during 2011.

To find out how the federal government spent every penny of your income tax in 2011, enter the amount of federal income tax you paid in this interactive tool on the National Priorities Project website:

<http://nationalpriorities.org/en/interactive-data/taxday/>

Poll organizers would like to thank members of the community who participated in the penny poll. A special thank-you goes to Sarah Bell and the library staff for hosting the poll. We are fortunate to have a public library that supports the rich exchange of ideas, experiences and perspectives. Had we included a category for libraries, I am certain it would have garnered a considerable share of the penny poll vote!

Results from the poll will be shared with our federal elected representatives, Senators Murkowski and Begich, Congressman Young, and President Obama. For a copy of the complete 2012 penny poll report, contact Cindy Litman, [cindylitman@gmail.com](mailto:cindylitman@gmail.com)