

Sub-standard

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Should tax money go to deprived children, or to a museum piece?

ONE day this spring, a group of youngsters travelled in battered yellow school buses to the South Carolina legislature in Columbia.

They went there to show photographs they had taken of their shockingly dilapidated school buildings in rural parts of the state. The pictures showed dripping ceilings, creeping mould, filthy drinking fountains, smashed toilets, makeshift heating and air-conditioning units, rat droppings, and rat poison left lying around. By displaying these, the children hoped to persuade legislators to spend more money on the state's schools.

Their campaign included a film, "Corridor of Shame", which documents the dreadful condition of many of South Carolina's rural schools. The film has been shown on statewide television and in cinemas. But 12 years after 40 rural school districts filed a lawsuit alleging unequal school funding, a circuit judge ruled late last year that South Carolina had no obligation to repair tumbledown facilities or raise teachers' pay. The state does, however, have to spend more money on early childhood education. (In New York, Alaska, Georgia and Montana there have been similar rulings in school-funding cases that challenged the government's role in education.)

Decrepit buildings are only part of the problem. South Carolina is 49th among the 50 states in overall high-school SAT scores (which colleges use to determine admissions), and lowest in its high-school graduation rate. Among more general indicators, teenage pregnancy, infant mortality and child-poverty rates are all considerably higher than the national average. South Carolina's unemployment rate in April, 6.6%, was the fourth-highest in the country, and in some of the state's poorer, majority-black counties it is approaching 13%. Last year the state's income per head was eighth from the bottom of the state rankings.

So what are South Carolina's legislators doing with taxpayers' money?

Not spending it on health care for the poor; legislation that would have raised the cigarette tax for that purpose (it is currently the lowest in the country, at seven cents a pack) was recently voted down.

Instead, South Carolina is said to be planning to spend nearly \$100m, which would more than cover the cost of most of the state's public projects, to preserve and display a civil-war submarine called the HUNLEY.

This innovative machine, which was propelled by manpower, was the first submarine ever to sink an enemy ship in wartime, in February 1864. Having dispatched to the bottom a Union ship called the HOUSATONIC, she mysteriously disappeared immediately afterwards. In 1995 she was discovered in 18 feet (six metres) of water in Charleston harbour, and in 2000 she was raised. The skeletons of her eight-man crew were still on board.

It now appears that Glenn McConnell, a powerful state senator from Charleston, has been quietly funnelling state, federal and private money into the HUNLEY project outside the usual budget channels. Mr McConnell has made no secret of his passion; he dresses up in Confederate uniform and runs a civil war memorabilia shop. But his fund-raising is another matter. Mark Sanford, South Carolina's governor, has admitted he had no idea about the projected costs in the pipeline for the HUNLEY, and neither did most of Mr McConnell's fellow legislators. Nine state House representatives have now demanded an audit by the Legislative Audit Council, a state watchdog agency, of the public funds handled since the late 1990s by the Hunley Commission, which Mr McConnell chairs. He, of course, objects.

South Carolina's taxpayers are aghast at what is being proposed. But Mr McConnell argues that the restored submarine will be a big draw for Charleston, where civil war battles are regularly re-enacted and where the HUNLEY crew was buried in a ceremony in 2004. To date, only \$13.8m in state, local and federal money has actually gone to HUNLEY-related projects, with another \$15.5m committed.

Fittingly, if the Hunley Museum opens as planned seven to ten years from now, it will be close to Fort Sumter in Charleston, where the shots that began the civil war were fired in April 1861. It also won't be far from some of those poor rural schools that may still be falling apart.