ROB WASSMER HAS ISSUES

Whether it’s a study on the causes of urban sprawl or an analysis of California’s flawed budget framework, there’s a good chance Public Policy Professor Robert Wassmer’s findings won’t just make it into the classroom. They’ll reach the halls of the State Capitol.

During his 13 years at Sac State, Wassmer has reported to lawmakers on various public policy issues ranging from education, economic development, emergency room use, land use, local governance and taxation.

“It is critical to have an academic study issues important to the well-being of the public and offer an independent assessment,” says Wassmer, who is the public policy and administration department’s chair. “I value this role as a professor and try to take it as often as I can.”

Wassmer’s research has exposed whether urban sprawl raises home prices and why some K-12 schools in high poverty areas outperform others, as well as the success of tax incentives in stimulating business activity, and what drives the differences in transfer rates among California’s community colleges.

Wassmer served as a visiting consultant to the California State Office of Research where he advised California senators and their staff on public school, community college and public finance issues. He also worked as a research fellow for the California Institute for County Government. Through the years he has reported to many California Legislative committees and offered fiscal advice to Sacramento County, and Detroit and Los Angeles city leaders.

In 2004, he presented evidence on behalf of Assembly member Darryl Steinberg’s AB 680 which sought to regionalize retail tax revenue to curb urban sprawl. During his testimony, Wassmer showed the link between a jump in retail space in cities with exclusive sales tax revenues. Though the measure didn’t pass the Senate, Wassmer says, “If asked, I will always try to find the time to do my best to examine a public concern and offer unbiased advice on how best to deal with it.”

Wassmer’s latest findings are another example of his eagerness to take on statewide issues. According to Wassmer’s most recent research, Californians could skip the annual budget roller coaster ride if state officials were willing to reform the budgeting process and revenue stream.

“We wouldn’t go into this scramble mode where we are facing having to generate a proposed 10 percent across-the-board cut in spending and revenue enhancements in the form of an increase in sales tax or leasing of the state’s lottery,” he says.

At issue, mostly, Wassmer says is the how California’s adoption of Proposition 13 in 1978 began what he considers a downward spiral in the reliability of the state’s budgetary process by forcing it to pay for services once provided by local governments, and funding them with unstable personal income taxes derived by capital gains. The initiative further compounded the state’s fiscal system that only says a simple majority vote by the legislature is required to spend more, but a two-thirds majority vote is required to raise taxes to pay for spending.

“California has really gotten itself out of line on the kind of money it spends and the money that it brings in,” says Wassmer.

He proposes lawmakers create a rainy day fund by tapping into revenues generated by greenhouse gas emission requirements.

Wassmer’s policy opinions have appeared in The Sacramento Bee. In addition, he has offered policy advice to the Urban Land Institute, Community Services Planning Council, National Education Association, California Futures Network, Sacramento Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, the Sacramento chapter of the American Lung Association and UC Davis Medical Center.

On campus, Wassmer teaches master’s level courses in applied microeconomics, public policy, statistics and urban economics. He also co-directs the master’s program in urban land development offered jointly with the College of Business Administration.

“My biggest rewards still come from the teaching arena,” he says. “Research allows me to remain fresh and connected for my students.”