

Legislative tricks cause money problems

The mess created by the Kansas Legislature's "creative" financing of schools last year ought to teach us a lesson.

We probably won't learn, but we should.

The Legislature, you remember, "found" money to balance the budget in 2003 by advancing the collection date for property taxes a month. That meant we had to pay the second half of our taxes in May rather than June.

That was no big deal for cities and counties, which run on a calendar year. Their income was the same, and they got the money a little earlier.

For the state, though, it meant moving the second-half collection into the old fiscal year. The effect was a one-time shot in the arm for the state budget, created by accounting magic and nothing more.

Schools got a little money out of that, but local school districts were not allowed to take the windfall. Only the state got the benefit.

School districts were supposed to lower their property tax levy last year and raise it some this year to avoid getting any extra money. Of course, superintendents did everything they could to keep a little of the money. That's only natural.

Now, the state is stuck with the change. There's no way to put tax collections back to June where they belong. There's no extra money this year for schools. There is no way to tap that well again.

While state revenues are improving, there is a lot of pent up demand. The Legislature is going to be under pressure to raise taxes to pay for any number of programs: schools, universities, prisons, social service, you name it.

Times are not that good, though. The voters were in a conservative mood this summer, casting out liberal members of the Legislature and the state Board of Education.

Our prediction: There'll be no general tax increase, because people don't think they can afford one.

Spending fans won't like that conclusion, but here's to say it'll come true.

People seem to want to keep a lid on state spending. There are lots of pressure groups, mostly those who benefit from state programs, schools and the like. They don't, apparently have the votes to elect many legislators.

So this year, the Legislature will have to chop and trim and fit spending into revenue estimates. Members will need to be firm.

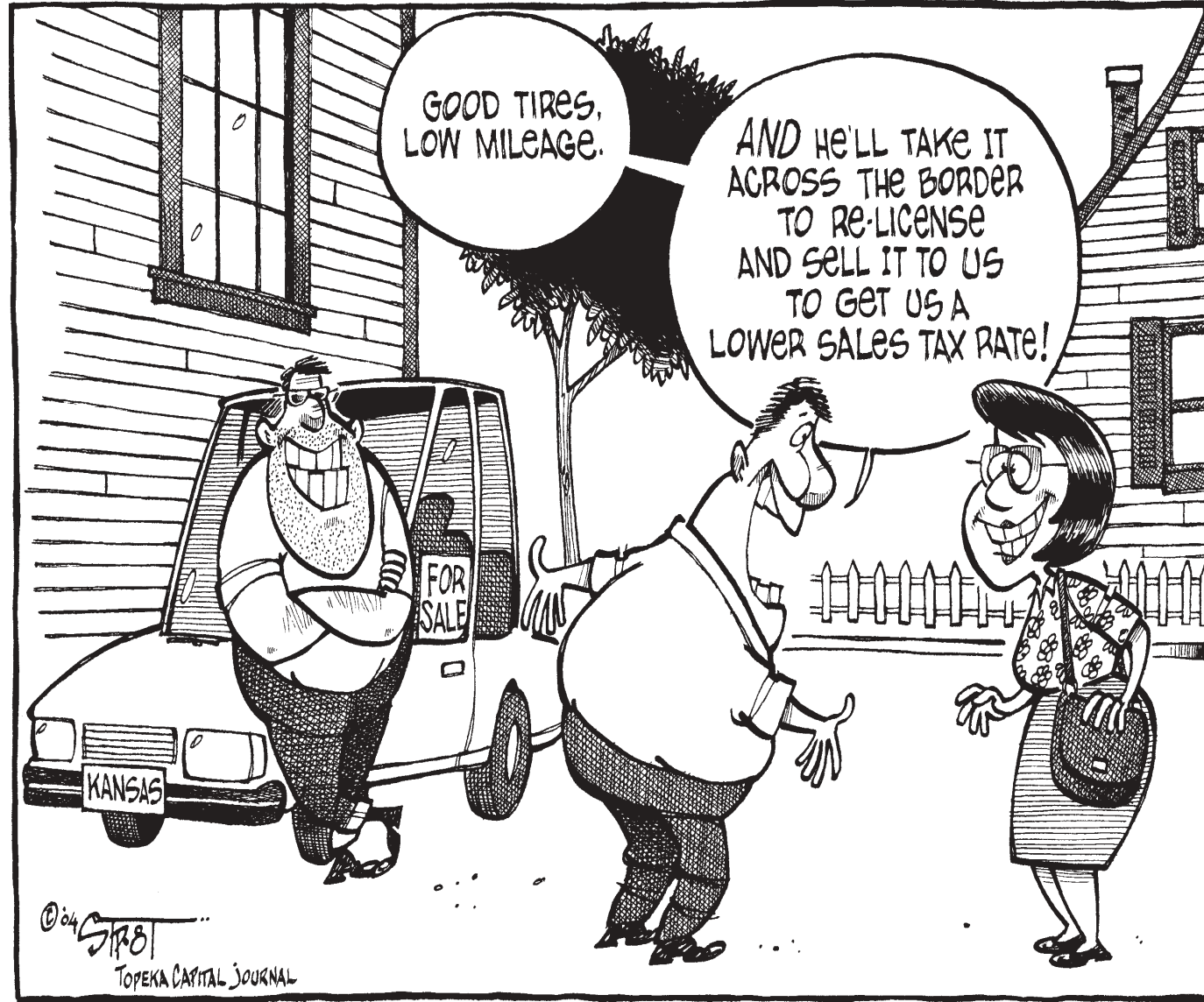
And we hope they have learned one lesson, if nothing else: Be real.

Accounting tricks always come back to haunt you. They don't create money, just problems.

Solve the budget problems the way it should be done: Allocate money where it's important, to schools, colleges, highways and vital programs. Eliminate waste. Cut spending until the budget fits.

And leave the smoke and mirrors alone.

— Steve Haynes



Age may finally be taking its toll

You have to promise not to tell our kids, or they're going to start checking out retirement homes for us.

Last week we switched refrigerators and in the clean-out process, I discovered a "mystery" container. It held something that looked like pancake mix so I stirred up a batch. An egg, a little cooking oil, some milk and a hot skillet. They looked like pancakes, but they didn't taste like pancakes. It was masa harina flour. Great for tortillas, but not pancakes.

Still, I didn't want to be wasteful, so I went ahead and cooked all the batter, knowing the chickens wouldn't be too discriminating. They'll eat anything. In no time at all I had a nice little stack of "masacakes" cooling on the counter just waiting to go into the scrap bucket for the little cluckers.

By now, though, Jim really did want pancakes, so I got out the Bisquick and stirred up a batch.

"Come and get 'em," I called out to him when the first round of cakes were done. Everything was sitting on the stove ready for him to fix his plate: The silverware, the soft margarine he likes, the warmed syrup.

Out Back Carolyn Plotts



We usually say grace in the kitchen before filling our plates and carrying them to the table. After the last "Amen," Jim started in. I was finishing the last of the batter, planning to freeze the extra pancakes for a quick breakfast at a later date.

"Now, why did I do that?" I heard Jim say.

He had poured pancake syrup in the butter bowl. As he transferred the syrup from the butter container onto his pancakes, I had to needle him just a little about his absent-mindedness.

"What's it worth to you for me to not tell the kids you're losing it?" I chided, all the while flipping pancakes and stacking them up. When the last one was done, I flipped the lid on the scrap bucket, and blithely tossed in a handful of "good" pan-

cakes while the masacakes I meant to give the chickens remained on the counter.

"Now, why did I do that?" I asked myself.

Jim had an answer. "I don't know. But I won't tell if you won't."

Oh, my. What a pair we're going to be.

—ob—

There is no excitement like seeing the world through the eyes of a child. A phone call to 5-year-old Taylor last night made that evident.

"Guess what, Grandma. I am so happy," she began.

"Why are you so happy?" I asked.

"Because for the first time, I got to check a book out of the library. And it's about Clifford and his family. And I'm learning to read it. And Mom said if I practice and practice, I'll learn how. And I'm sounding it out. Good night, I love you."

"I love you, too," I say into empty air.

Kara picked up the phone and I asked her, "Is she really reading so soon?"

"Let's just say she's memorizing it," was Kara's answer.

I'm with Taylor. I think she's reading it.

Now that the cats are out of the bag...

It's pretty widely known that, when it comes to cats, my wife is crazy, but I think things may be getting out of hand.

It all started when youngest daughter took her two cats to our house in Colorado last year.

She was spending the summer, or thought she was, and she had to take the cats or find someone to keep them. That made sense to me. (In fact, she wound up in the hospital back in Kansas and had to find someone to feed them in Colorado. Go figure.)

Lindsay was waiting tables while on break from her teaching job. She said the cats liked the house fine, but she had to make them stay inside after one tangled with a raccoon.

When we went for a week's vacation, though, it gave Cynthia ideas.

"I kind of liked having a cat there," she said, with a twinkle in her eye.

I should have seen it coming. When we packed up to go close the house in October, she slipped a cat carrier into the car.

It was just April Alice, the calm cat. April travels well. She just sits in the carrier all day, saying nary a thing until you exceed her kidney limit.

Until then, we had paid a friend to bring in the mail and feed the cats when we went on vacation. I was fine with that. I can go a week without petting a cat.

Apparently, though, some people can't. Now, you could say this is my fault, because I do take the dog to Colorado.

And Cynthia always says she's my dog, because I brought her home.

Fair enough, though I am not the one who buys her bones and toys for her trips.

We started taking her because she is wild and rambunctious and likes to run, and Colorado is full of wide-open spaces.

On the Prairie Dog Steve Haynes



Annie likes cold, wet, water and a place to run, so the mountains are perfect for her.

But Cynthia always said the best thing about cats was that you can leave them at home and they don't take much care. Cats need food and water, but you can leave that out in big bowls. Ours just need someone to let them in and out once a day.

A dog, you have to feed daily. If you left a big bowl of food, the dog would eat it the first day and starve by the seventh.

Anyway, I don't remember anything in that rap about taking the cats with you. Still, I was fine with April Alice, because she travels well and the first night she was there, she caught a mouse, making her useful as well as decorative.

Then last week, Cynthia shows up at the car with two cat carriers. This did not look good, because the other cat, Molly Monster, hates to travel. She cries the whole

time she's in a car and tries to destroy the upholstery.

"Not to worry," the cat lady says, producing a bottle of kitty tranquilizers. "The cat will be calm."

Now, giving a cat a pill involves shoving it down the cat's throat, past the teeth, and with a normal cat, it can be quite an adventure.

"Leave me out," I said. Yeah, I'm chicken. They don't call Molly the Monster for nuthin'.

I have to admit, the pills kept her meows down to a dull whine. Her eyes went screwy and she laid down in her carrier.

And I have to admit, she seemed to enjoy her time at the new house, at least until the cat lady tried to give her another pill for the trip home. I think a fingertip may have been damaged in that struggle.

She actually seemed to like being in Colorado better than being at home. When we're gone, she gets lonely and leaves little "presents" around the house. Then she snubs us for a day or so after we get back.

So it looks like we'll be traveling with three pet carriers for a while, and we may need a bigger truck.

But hey, a cat lady has to have something to pet, right?

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Office hours:

8 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Mon.-Fri.

Phone: (785) 877-3361

Fax: (785) 877-3732

E-mail: telegram@nwkansas.com

STAFF

Cynthia Haynes editor and publisher
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