

Do taxpayers really want an increase?

Elsewhere on the page, you'll find an argument for a tax increase to keep Kansas government growing.

The esteemed Emerson Lynn Jr. of the Iola Register argues that Kansas wouldn't have the financial fix it's in today if only the Legislature hadn't cut taxes all through the 1990s.

Mr. Lynn is the dean of Kansas editors and perhaps the state's finest editorialist. He makes his point with eloquence. A reader asked if we would reprint his piece, and we have. He does not reach the same conclusions we do, but then, the right answer to any question often depends on your viewpoint.

There is little doubt that the Legislature will put more money into schools this year, maybe as much as the \$455 million Senate proposal, in an effort to appease the courts and school districts that feel slighted by the state financing formula.

There is a limit to how much the state can pay, though, without raising taxes, and there is no sign that Kansas taxpayers want or would approve that.

Times are tough in this state. After five years of drought and recession, small businesses are on their knees. The economic "recovery" moves at a snail's pace.

State government has felt the recession as hard as anyone. Income hasn't met expectations for years, and budgets have been tight. Schools know they can expect little help from a strapped state.

In our view, the state, and Kansas schools, need to make do with what they have, just as Kansas businesses and taxpayers have been doing.

There is no sign of a crisis in education, other than the artificial crisis created by a lawsuit challenging the state's school funding formula. In that case, the plaintiffs were school districts that failed to get what they wanted from the Legislature, and so turned to the courts.

But across the state, test scores are high. Kansas students are learning and schools are improving, despite the budget crunch.

It's true, in the 1990s, the state did slash taxes. It did what government should do when it gets too much money: give some back to the people who earned it.

Cries to boost the school budget belie the fact that state spending has increased every year for 40 years except one. Over that time, the budget has grown from \$526.5 million in 1966 to a projected \$11.268 billion next year, an astounding 21 times growth.

Adjusted for inflation, today's budget still is nearly four times the 1966 version. Why?

Schools. Welfare. New programs and agencies. But mostly schools and welfare.

The dreams of 1966 are today's entitlements, and if you listen to some people, the growth will continue.

The voters, though, are fed up. They elected more conservatives to the Legislature last year, not more spenders. They have no use for a tax increase. They don't see a crisis in education, only a crisis in the courts.

And it is their money. Let's see if they are convinced schools really need a tax increase.

—Steve Haynes



Chicks on their way to Mexico

Here we go again, back in Mexico to build another house. It was a short turn-around this time, only two weeks between trips. We didn't mean for it to happen this way; it just did.

Actually we read the calendar wrong. Last year, when the arrangements were being made, we thought it was the 17th of March. Instead, it was the 7th.

We arrived in El Paso early enough Saturday evening that we decided to cross the border and try to find this beautiful Mexican restaurant we had eaten at once before. I would never try this alone, because I get turned around in downtown Juarez, but Jim always seems to know where he is and drove us right to it.

The manager remembered us from the last time we were there and was the most gracious host. The service was impeccable and the food out of this world. I had scallops and Jim had bacon-wrapped, stuffed shrimp. For dessert, we shared a piece of chocolate flan with coffee.

If you ever get a chance to eat in Juarez, we recommend Los Arcos. Be sure to tell Esteban "Hola" from us.

Out Back

Carolyn Plotts



—ob—

I'm not sure if I should advertise this or not, but I usually operate under the theory that it's easier to get forgiveness than it is to get permission, so here goes.

For some time now we have been talking about giving something to the families that would help them provide for themselves in the future.

But what? Jim hit on the idea of a flock of chickens.

It seemed like the perfect solution. Baby chicks would be easy to transport. Throw in a sack of feed to get them started and a family could have an ongoing source of food and eventually even money

if they had a surplus of eggs to sell. That is how we happen to have a box containing eight little chicks riding in the back seat during this 800-mile trip. Not only did we have "potty breaks" for ourselves, but we had to make sure the chicks were fed and watered regularly.

They seem to be managing fine and I'm sure they will be a welcome regalo (gift) to the family.

It's time to shut this down and get some sleep. I just found myself asleep at the keyboard of my laptop. We need to be up early tomorrow for church. After that, we're taking our missionary friend, Amy, out to lunch before we meet the team we'll be working with this week.

Until next week, "Hasta la vista."

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Republicans focus on Sebelius, ignore Kansas kids

By EMERSON LYNN JR.
The Iola Register

Last Tuesday, the Kansas Senate Education Committee produced a plan to raise spending on the state's public schools by \$455 million over the next three years, which would include hikes for bilingual, special education and poor children.

If passed, it would become the largest increase since the state took over school finance in 1992.

The Senate plan appears to be an earnest effort to meet demands made by the Supreme Court to spend more on K-12 and distribute the funds more fairly.

As it stands, however, it doesn't pass muster because the money isn't there. Perhaps the first year could be funded

from existing money by stripping the treasury of its reserves and ripping funds away from other areas that don't have enough political clout to protect their budgets.

Sponsors say privately they know that tax increases would be necessary for years two and three — and maybe this year, too. They aren't tready, however, to say which taxes should be increased or by how much.

The Senate plan is even richer than the one Gov. Kathleen Sebelius proposed last year. She asked for \$310 million over three years. The difference, however, is that she recognized that increased spending required increased income and proposed higher sales, income and property

taxes to pay for it. The plan was rejected by the Legislature without serious debate, not because it was a bad idea, but because it was a Sebelius idea.

This sequence of events leads to only one conclusion: This year's Republican-dominated Legislature is trying every trick in the book to avoid raising taxes for schools because doing so would benefit the governor politically.

Republican leaders seem to believe that raising the revenue needed to provide Kansas students with an adequate education would be seen by voters as an admission that Gov. Sebelius was right and they were wrong. To do so would help her win re-election next year, they tell themselves.

THEY ARE WRONG in every way they could be on this issue.

The reason that Kansas is short of the money it needs for its public schools is that the Legislature cut taxes sharply under Gov. Bill Graves when the treasury was flush during the boom years of the 1990s. The statewide property tax, for example, was slashed from 35 mills to 20 mills. More property tax was lost when the homestead exemption was increased. Still other exemptions reduced state income from the sales tax. Steps to stimulate business added further tax exemptions and reductions.

The overall impact of tax cuts in the 90s by now amounts to billions. The primary

reason why state funding falls short of today's public school needs is that the state's tax structure was severely weakened during those eight years. It is unrealistic to argue that those needs can now be met without restoring at least some of the income that they, themselves, stripped away.

Republicans may be aiming at Gov. Sebelius with their no-tax-hike rhetoric but the shots backfire. The lawmakers in control come across as Scrooges willing to short-change Kansas youngsters to make political points. They also give ammunition to critics who point to skyrocketing local taxes and blame the Republicans for begging school districts, cities and counties so that they can take credit with voters for holding down state taxes.

Kansans are brighter than that. They know their schools are underfunded. They know that the property tax increases they face at home are being forced on them by state government's refusal to meet state responsibilities.

The best campaign strategy Kansas Republicans could follow for 2006 would be to forget the opposition and focus on doing the best job they can to fulfill the responsibilities the state has to its citizens.

Providing a top-notch education to every Kansas child remains at the top of that list.

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