

# Opinion



## Free Press Viewpoint

### It is that time of year in Topeka

What was she thinking about?  
Gov. Kathleen Sebelius proposes taxing drivers on the Kansas Turnpike to pay for fixing up old buildings at the state's colleges and universities.

The governor suggests raising tolls every two years to bring in \$575 million. The money would be used to pay for repairs at state universities. Up to \$300 million in bonds would speed the remodeling projects, and those would have to be paid out of the tolls — with interest.

The plan met a cool reception in the Republican-controlled Legislature. Everyone except college presidents — from the Turnpike Authority to the truckers — thought it was a bad plan.

Reggie Robinson, chief executive officer for the state Board of Regents, called the plan "serious, creative and comprehensive." OK, he would.

The state has to do something to fix up its colleges, but the governor's plan — though it is creative — just doesn't make sense. Why tax truckers and other drivers to fix up classrooms?

Why not telephone users or electric "rate payers?" Makes just as much sense.

If the Kansas Turnpike has that much excess toll-generating capacity, maybe the authority could use the money to add lanes on the crowded section between Kansas City and Topeka — or even build a whole new road from the Kansas City airport to Manhattan on the north side of the Kaw River.

But using tolls to finance colleges?

It's just a disguised tax increase, and not a very appealing one at that.

Doing something about the nearly \$727 million in building repairs supposedly needed at state colleges is one of the top issues facing the Legislature this year. Kansas should do something, but a tax increase is out of the question.

This is one of the problems created by the state's fixation on public schools over the last 10 years. Colleges and universities have been left to fend for themselves. They've hiked tuition, but have raised nothing for building repairs and renovation.

The Legislature needs to come up with a plan. This isn't it.

They should pare the list to essential projects and find a way to pay for those.

If you want to tax people fairly, usually you apply a tax to those who benefit from the spending, or to the state at large. Taxing drivers to pay for colleges just makes no sense at all.

Creative, yes. Realistic, no.

But it is that time of the year in Topeka.

We can and must do better. — *Steve Haynes, president of Nor'West Newspapers including the Colby Free Press*

#### About those letters . . .

The *Free Press* encourages and welcomes letters from readers. Letters should be typewritten, if at all possible, and should include a telephone number and an address. Most importantly, all letters must include a signature. Unsigned letters cannot be published. We reserve the right to edit for clarity and length, and, likewise, reserve the right to reject letters deemed to be of no public interest or considered offensive or libelous.

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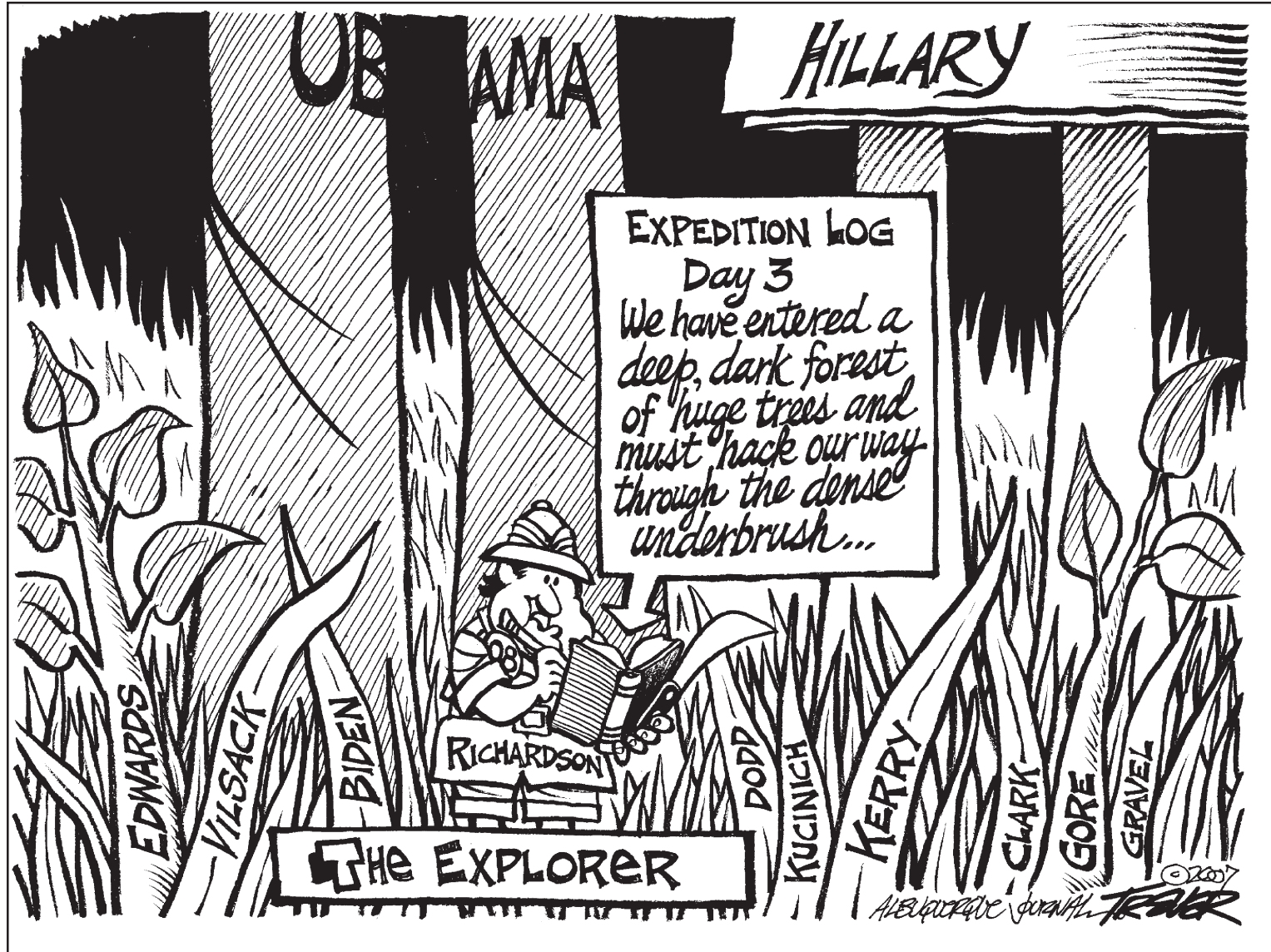
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#### Nor'West Newspapers

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### Getting to the top takes money

Short of a revolt, Sheridan County taxpayers should demand Commissioners David Zimmerman, Keith Kennedy and Ron Schamberger be held accountable for how tax dollars are spent.

Part of that accountability is to install an elevator in the courthouse.

Congressman Jerry Moran was in Hoxie Friday and anyone wanting to talk to him had to climb three stories of stairs to the courtroom of the Sheridan County Courthouse.

Commission boards have talked about installing an elevator in the courthouse since the Americans with Disabilities Act became law in 1992. Talk is all they've done. The topic last came up in September 2005 after a 77-year-old John Bergman of Aurora, Colo., fell down 10 feet of the marble stairs and bruised his right shoulder and ribs. After Bergman's fall, Kennedy said installing an elevator was just "too expensive."

I disagree.  
An elevator must be installed before someone is seriously injured or dies. While the county maintains \$1 million dollars worth of liability insurance, how much will it cost when the county is sued for not having an elevator?

I'm tired of the first phrase coming out of these commissioners mouth is, "Is there grant money for that?" Grant money isn't free money and should not be relied on as the first line of defense for a county's budget.

I spoke with Mort Plunkett of Plunkett Architect of Hill City and he said it is feasible to install an elevator in the retired vaults of two old records rooms for less than \$100,000. That's a far cry from the \$300,000 plus dollar figure the commissioners have been spouting off.

I reviewed the 2006 financial management report of each county department and found money that could have been used for an elevator. An elevator project could be accomplished in two years, but it would require some major prioritizing.



#### Jan Katz Ackerman

##### • From Where I stand

Since \$50,000 was set aside in 2006 for a remodel job at the public health department, surely the same amount can be found for an elevator in the next two years. The first place the commissioners could start is to assure the public they are accepting the lowest bid on all major expenses, including equipment for the road and bridge department.

Second, the commissioners can trim some fat from their own department. They need to follow Hoxie officials' lead and get off the county's health insurance plan since they do not work 30 hours per week. Sure, they might argue they are on call 24-7, but let's get real, they aren't doing county business 24-7. Or 30 hours a week for that matter. The commissioners require county employees to work at least 30 hours before getting benefits, so what's good for the goose ought to be good for the gander.

Short of this suggestion, just like Hoxie requires of employees, Kennedy could save the county \$19,032 in two years if he would pay the county \$793 a month, the difference between a single and family plan he wants. Or he could do like my husband and I do, husband takes the city's insurance as a benefit and I pay for my own with an outside plan.

If Zimmerman and Schamberger stopped taking cash reimbursements of \$587 a month, in two years the elevator fund would grow by \$14,088. Besides the commissioners and three county employees get cash reimbursements. If stopped, another \$22,367 could be set aside from the elevator in two years. All it would take

to make this measure work would be for the commissioners to rescind Resolution No. 07-02 and take off the part about the insurance reimbursement.

It's not a reimbursement, it's a cash payment for their decision to opt out of taking the health insurance. The city of Hoxie lets employees opt out but does not give them cash if they do not take the plan.

And Kennedy could repay the \$200 Zimmerman and Schamberger authorized in April for him picking up trash on his own land which blew there from the landfill. If Kennedy picked up trash he should have done it voluntarily rather than charge the county.

Given these changes, the hypothetical elevator fund now sits at \$105,487. Now let's talk about meals.

The fair board could pay back the \$455 dollars it spent for a Christmas party in 2006. And according to the federal tax code, meals can only be reimbursed if an employee stays overnight somewhere. If an employee has the need to eat while away for a daytime meeting, the meal can be reimbursed, but only as taxable income.

But according to the county's auditor, David Leopold, there is a loophole to the law if the meal reimbursements are not a major part of a budget. Major portion or not, according to the county's reports I reviewed, more than \$500 in meals was reimbursed to county employees in 2006. I asked if they were taxed and the county clerk said they were not.

Stop meal reimbursements except for overnight trips and the elevator fund is now close to \$106,442.

Sheridan County taxpayers it's time to demand an elevator.

*Jan Katz Ackerman is a reporter for the Colby Free Press.*

### One Less Life campaign poses questions

**By Lisa Molstad, Thomas County Health Administrator**

It's was a typical busy Wednesday on our weekly Women's Health Day at the Thomas County Health Department - seeing patients, reassuring, educating, scheduling referrals.

Over lunch we discussed Texas Governor Rick Perry's executive order requiring all girls age 11 and 12 to receive the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine prior to entering sixth grade.

A statement from Perry's office is pure public health and politics: "Never before have we had an opportunity to prevent cancer with a simple vaccine. While I understand the concerns expressed by some, I stand firmly on the side of protecting life. The HPV vaccine does not promote sex, it protects women's health. In the past, young women who have abstained from sex until marriage have contracted HPV from their husbands and faced the difficult task of defeating cervical cancer. This vaccine prevents this from happening."

And it's pure coincidence that a pharmaceutical rep from Merck (the vaccine company which developed and markets Gardasil, the HPV

vaccine) dropped by during lunch to leave a supply of new promotional brochures - bringing to us their new One Less education campaign targeting parents and girls. I'd been waiting for these.

As a former health educator, I embrace Merck's campaign. It's a wonderful tool to spread the word about preventing cervical cancer. As a public health administrator, I admire Perry's cutting edge actions.

As a parent, I understand the concern that may arise. It's easy to get caught up in the euphoria of the silver bullet, insist that this is simply another immunization program to protect our children, breathe a sigh of relief that it's one less communicable disease that's preventable. Yet, we need to be very careful of the implications and embrace the opportunities.

Perry has been clear that Texas is not infringing on a parent's right to decide if and when the HPV vaccine is given (there is an opt-out provision for religious or philosophical reasons). Parents need to know that the vaccine should be given with counseling with an age-appropriate discussion of HPV — the virus that causes cervical cancer — and how it is spread. For ado-

lescent girls and older, that discussion should be clear that HPV is only one of several life-threatening sexually transmitted infections (STIs). HPV is tricky because it is often transmitted by sexual activity without intercourse.

So once again a life-threatening disease spread by intimate contact presents an opportunity to talk to our children. STI history repeats itself. Don't miss this opportunity to share with your child the facts of life, love and protecting themselves. It's another chance to empower our young women (and men) with information and answers.

The Centers for Disease Control issued national recommendations that girls age 11-12 (and females through age 26) receive this immunization. More legislation is certain to follow.

You may have already seen or heard the compelling One Less Gardasil commercials. It's available at Thomas County Health Department and through other local providers. And it's another choice parents have to make. We will be happy to provide you with whatever information you need to help start and continue the conversations with your children to help save lives.

#### Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce

Tinsley

