

Opinion



A Kansas Viewpoint

Two-step ends bill

By Tom Betz

Relying on information on the Kansas Legislature's web site left us with some egg on our face this week.

Technically, House Bill 2307 did pass both houses unanimously Saturday afternoon. That should mean Sherman County voters will be deciding whether to elect county commissioners at large this fall.

The problem is none of the language of the bill as passed had anything to do with allowing Sherman County voters to consider the issue of at-large voting.

The bill status on the state web site Sunday said the conference committee report for HB2307 had passed both the House and Senate. Checking the full text of the bill on the web site showed the language about the at-large voting for Sherman County commissioners which passed the Senate in April.

What we did not do was check the House and Senate journals to see what had been done to the bill when it was brought up Saturday afternoon and both houses suspended the rules to consider changing the language.

Apparently, we weren't the only ones who were taken in. Rep. Jim Morrison (R-Colby) said Wednesday he was surprised to find the bill he had voted for on Saturday was not the Sherman County bill as listed on the web site.

Morrison said apparently the conference committee had used the bill number to fix a previously passed bill which the governor's office had found an error in. He said when the bill was brought up on Saturday, he thought it was the Sherman County bill with a few technical changes.

The at-large voting bill is dead for this year, but depending on the outcome of the election in November, the people of Sherman County could decide the issue is important enough to ask the Legislature to give it another try next year.

Rep. Morrison and Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer (R-Grinnell) worked to get the bill passed over the past two sessions, but in the end, the legislative needs for an open bill number superseded the efforts of Sherman County, and left a bad taste in the mouths of many Sherman County citizens who had backed the at-large plan.

Confusing signals sent to Topeka by Sherman County officials should be a point of concern during the fall election campaigns. It is one thing to discuss an issue and not support it, but when the commissioners pass something unanimously asking the Legislature to pass a law, it hurts our credibility if those same officials are sabotaging the effort behind the scenes.

The at-large voting issue undoubtedly will be brought up during the campaigns this year. The issue should be part of a public forum, to give people a chance to give their point of view and give candidates a chance to explain their positions.

In the meantime, we will scrape the egg off our face and file this one away as a learning experience about Topeka and Kansas politics. — Tom Betz is editor of the Goodland Star-News

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Shortchanged?

Rebate checks have started being deposited into bank accounts, but for some, like myself, the amount fell short of expectations.

Even though my husband and I filed jointly, the amount sent to our bank was based on a single person's rebate amount.

Due to this discrepancy of at least an additional \$600, I called a friend of mine at the Internal Revenue Service for help. He gave the following advice, which might help someone else in the same situation.

He said the IRS is looking into reports they have received regarding this issue.

The answer for now is the IRS is expecting to have more information in the near future, and it will be shared as it becomes available.

He told me there was not a Stimulus Payment "hotline" to call. But everyone who gets a stimulus payment will also receive a notice from the IRS that explains how much they received and how that amount was calculated.

Everyone who gets the notice is asked to keep it when filing 2008 taxes - since this is something the IRS will ask taxpayers to provide in recalculating the payment and for those who did not receive the maximum, it will automatically figure in the difference. He also provided a question and answer web site at IRS.gov.

In addition, those of us who know we were shorted can also use the stimulus payment calculator, where we can enter information from our tax return and get a good estimation of



Patty Decker

• Deep Thoughts

how much the payment should be. If it was different, we should wait until they receive the notice telling them how it was calculated. Here is one of the questions based on the most frequently asked questions.

Q. I received my stimulus payment, but it was less than what my friends and neighbors received. Why?

A. Your economic stimulus payment is based on information provided on your 2007 income tax return.

Many but not all taxpayers qualify for the maximum basic payment of \$600 for singles or \$1,200 for married couples. Many parents are also receiving an additional \$300 for each qualifying child, born after Dec. 31, 1990.

Your payment may be less than the maximum for one or more of the following reasons:

You are single and your net income tax liability is less than \$600. If you file Form 1040 net income tax liability is the amount shown

on Line 57, plus the amount on Line 52.

You are married and your net income tax liability is less than \$1,200.

You are single and your adjusted gross income (AGI) is more than \$75,000. On Form 1040, AGI is the amount on Line 37.

You are married filing a joint return and your AGI is more than \$150,000.

You owe back taxes that reduced your payment.

You have non-tax federal debts such as unpaid student loans or child-support obligations that reduced your payment.

Around the time you receive your payment, you will also receive a notice from the IRS explaining how your payment was calculated. It is important to keep this notice as a record of your economic stimulus payment. In addition, you'll get a separate notice if you owe back taxes or non-tax debts that were offset or deducted from your stimulus payment.

Hopefully nobody else experienced this situation, but in case you did, I received my calculation notice today and there is a number to call - 866-234-2942.

Good luck, though. I have been trying all day and continue to get a recording saying that due to the overwhelming amount of callers, I need to try again later.

Patty Decker is editor of the Free Press. Her column appears on Mondays.

Penny for your thoughts?

The government is trying again to get people to use coins rather than printing more dollar bills, even though the last three attempts failed miserably.

The new dollar, featuring four U.S. presidents a year, is a noble effort to get people back to using coins, but probably no more popular for spending.

Americans cling to their coins, it seems, though a dollar today is worth just 15 cents in 1960 money.

Back in those days, we carried five sizes of coins in our pockets and pocketbooks: pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters and half dollars. The bulky silver dollar, even then, was little used, seen mostly at race tracks, casinos and the like, but you could get them at the bank.

The mint last issued big "silver" dollars around 1970, a "sandwich" coin like the quarter containing no silver and bearing a likeness of President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Those never caught on, nor did the Susan B. Anthony "silver" dollar, a smaller coin designed for vending machines a decade later.

People didn't like the Anthony coins because they looked and felt too much like a quarter, experts said. Businesses had long since converted cash drawers to just four kinds of coins and claimed they had no place to put the dollars.



Steve Haynes

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Never one to stand back from a challenge, despite repeated failure, the Treasury Department came up with another attempt, the small-sized Sacagawea dollar, themed to the Lewis and Clark bicentennial and tinted gold.

Despite cash-drawer support from Wal-Mart, the results were pretty much the same. Bank vaults filled up with dollars which people wouldn't spend or carry.

This time, the mint took a hint from the wildly successful state quarter program and decided to issue a series of coins, featuring four presidents each year.

Of course, the government hopes that millions of people will collect the coins. That won't improve their circulation, but it will make money for the government — as the quarters have — as long as they can be produced for less than face value.

Will Americans take to their new 15-cent coin?

You'd think so, given the low value of the dollar bill today, but history suggests otherwise.

Americans don't accept new coins or currency well. They rejected the \$2 bill when proffered as an alternative to the lowly dollar, and never have accepted dollar coins, at least not in this century.

Heck, we won't give up the little penny, now worth just .15 of a cent in 1960 money, only a little more than the "mil" tokens once given in change by some stores.

Any suggestion to get rid of pennies meets with a chorus of jeers, but they're worth so little, you wonder why we bother. People seem to think they will be cheated if transactions take place in five-cent increments. And maybe they're right.

But why should the government spend billions making such a worthless coin?

And why won't we carry the convenient little dollars, worth less than the quarters many people grew up with?

Go figure.

Seems like a waste of good paper printing all those \$1 bills to me, but Americans just don't seem to like change.

Steve Haynes is president of Nor'West Newspapers including the Colby Free Press

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Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

