

Opinion



Other Viewpoints

Budget success may not last long

State officials who thought their departments and agencies had escaped the annual budget process without significant funding cuts may have to pull the contingency plans from the shelf.

State revenues continue to decline, and if that trend continues, the \$13 billion budget legislators approved this month may require an overhaul before the 2010 fiscal year begins July 1.

If it comes to that, we think preparations the governor, legislators and department heads have made over the past year should stand them in good stead now as they deal with further revenue shortfalls.

The state's economic forecasters will issue a revised financial outlook on Friday, April 17, but revenues for March look to be as much as \$57 million below earlier estimates.

Reports that revenues won't cover planned expenditures aren't new to legislators or the state's department heads. They began planning for substantial cuts in state spending about a year ago, when the economic forecasters said income and sales tax revenues were in a down slide and could fall \$800 million to \$1 billion short of funding the 2010 budget.

To their credit, officials began planning for spending cuts then, but the subsequent receipt of \$585 million in federal "stimulus" money softened the blow. The budget was adopted with less partisan rancor than could have been expected.

If they now have to begin slicing away at their 2010 budget, plans made before the state received the stimulus money — which included requiring departments to slice expenditures by as much as 5 percent — should have identified the programs or projects to cut....

Officials who thought their departments had come through the process relatively unscathed may find it painful to prepare for further cuts, but the damage to their budgets still may be less than was anticipated last fall.

Whether that's the case won't be known until the April revenue forecast is in hand, but we think it's obvious budget revisions will be necessary.

And given the state of the nation's economy, we think it would be wise to begin preparing now for spending reductions in 2011 as well.

— Topeka Capital-Journal, via The Associated Press

Where to write, call

U.S. Sen. Pat Roberts, 109 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. (202) 224-4774

U.S. Sen. Sam Brownback, 303 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. (202) 224-6521

U.S. Rep. Jerry Moran, 2202 Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515. (202) 225-2715 or Fax (202) 225-5124

State Rep. Jim Morrison, State Capitol Building, 300 SW 10th St. Room 143-N, Topeka, Kan. 66612. (785) 296-7676 e-mail: jmorriso@ink.org web: www.morrisonfamily.com

State Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer, State Capitol Building, 300 SW10th St., Room 128-S., Topeka, Kan. 66612, (785) 296-7399 ralph.ostmeyer@senate.state.ks.us

COLBY FREE PRESS

155 W. Fifth St. (USPS 120-920) (785) 462-3963
Colby, Kan. 67701 fax (785) 462-7749

Send news to: colby.editor@nwkansas.com

State award-winning newspaper, General Excellence, Design & Layout, Columns, Editorial Writing, Sports Columns, News, Photography. Official newspaper of Thomas County, Colby, Brewster and Rexford.

Steve Haynes - Publisher
s.haynes@nwkansas.com

NEWS

Andy Heintz - Sports Reporter
aheintz@nwkansas.com

Marian Ballard - Copy Editor
mballard@nwkansas.com

Vera Sloan - Society Editor
colby.society@nwkansas.com

ADVERTISING

Jasmine Stewart - Advertising Manager
jstewart@nwkansas.com

Heather Woofter - Advertising Sales
hwoofter@nwkansas.com

Kathryn Ballard - Graphic Design
kballard@nwkansas.com

BUSINESS OFFICE

Tammy Withers - Office Manager
twithers@nwkansas.com

Evan Barnum - Systems Administrator
support@nwkansas.com

NOR'WEST PRESS

Jim Bowker - General Manager

Richard Westfahl, Lana Westfahl, Jim Jackson, Betty Morris, James Ornelas, Barbara Ornelas, Tasha Shores, Daniel Spillman

THE COLBY FREE PRESS (USPS 120-920) is published every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, except the days observed for Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year's Day, by Nor'West Newspaper, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

PERIODICALS POSTAGE paid at Colby, Kan. 67701, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Colby Free Press, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

THE BUSINESS OFFICE at 155 W. Fifth is open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Friday, closed Saturday and Sunday. MEMBER OF THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, which is exclusively entitled to the use for publication of all news herein. Member Kansas Press Association and National Newspaper Association.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: In Colby by carrier: 4 months \$40, 8 months \$56, 12 months \$74. By mail within Colby and the nine-county region of Thomas, Sheridan, Decatur, Rawlins, Cheyenne, Sherman, Wallace, Logan and Gove counties: 4 months \$53, 8 months \$65, 12 months \$82. Other Kansas counties: 4 months \$60, 8 months \$70, 12 months \$85. All other states, \$85, 12 months.



Is the Postal Service dying?

The U.S. Postal Service, broke by fall?

It's not just a bad dream, though it's not likely that mail service will stop or the steady stream of a mail and bills by your front door will dry up.

But Postmaster General Jack Potter isn't kidding when he talks about cutting back from six days a week to five, or eliminating hundreds of tiny rural post offices that don't pay their way. More than 4,500, he noted, serve less than 100 customers.

Postal volume is down 13 percent this year with the recession, Potter said in a meeting with rural editors and publishers, and the service faces a \$6 billion budget gap this year. That's despite cost cuts that included 50 million work hours and 20,000 jobs last year and perhaps 50,000 jobs this year.

"No one is predicting a quick turnaround," the beleaguered postal chief added.

Even the view from the top floor of postal headquarters, with its sweeping panorama of the Potomac and northern Virginia, offered little solace.

The service is cutting costs like mad. It's closing and revamping bulk mail sorting centers that have run out of work and automating sorting of "flats" — big envelopes, newspapers, magazines and advertising fliers — that now have to be "cased" by your mail carrier.

Still, the service is not asking for rate increases beyond the cap allowed under the postal reform bill passed a couple of years ago. Rates will go up next month, but they'll be close to the rate of inflation.

Postal volume has been affected not just by the recession, Potter said, but by the shift to



Steve Haynes

• Along the Sappa

electronic mail for much personal correspondence, business mail and even billing. The post office is left with advertising mail and specialty products. Oh, and Christmas cards, in season.

Anti-paper groups are pressing to end even that business, harping on people to send e-cards and pay bills electronically and "save trees." (They don't seem to realize that most trees made into paper are grown as a crop these days.)

Over the years, the postal chief said, there's always been something to replace lost volume, but not this time.

Another big problem is a law forcing the Postal Service to pay into a "trust fund" to pay future retirement benefits. Potter notes that regular government agencies don't have to do that. He's proposing a change to allow the service to skip that payment and use the trust fund to pay current benefits.

A compromise offered by Sen. Susan Collins of Maine and other Republicans would allow a two-year hiatus for the payments while Congress "studies" the problem. A barrier to passage is the cruel fact that such payments into the Treasury count against the budget deficit.

When Washington balances the books, then,

the Postal Service really is paying for deficit spending — and you're being taxed every time you buy a stamp.

Collins, for her part, said she fears cuts could spell the end of the Postal Service. She'd rather give the service a couple of years to come up with a better plan.

"If they raise rates and cut service, it could trigger a death spiral," she told the editors. "I believe this will cause more of the Postal Service's customers to look for other ways to deliver products."

She noted one problem Potter does not like to talk much about: expensive union contracts. It's not so much the pay rates as the work rules that cause problems. The president's budget, she said, included a proposal to save the Postal Service \$9.5 billion over 10 years through labor reform. It was quietly withdrawn, she said, after protests by union leaders.

"The financial picture of the Postal Service is bleak," Collins said. "The postmaster general hopes volume will come back, but some of that is lost forever."

Potter himself remains optimistic. "We're at a tough juncture," he said. "A lot of tough decisions have to be made...."

"Ultimately, we want to make sure that there is a healthy Postal Service, not for our good, but for the good of America."

Steve Haynes is editor and publisher of The Colby Free Press and president of Nor'West Newspapers. In his spare time, whenever that is, he like to ride and watch trains.

Compromise budget passes

The FY 2010 Mega Budget is one of the most difficult the state has had to face in decades. Difficult decisions must be made when state revenues drop as drastically as they have this year.

This is a compromise that accepts many of the governor's recommended cuts. There are spending cuts in this bill that no legislator likes, but we must do the responsible thing and reduce state spending.

According to the Legislative Research Department, March revenues are about \$57 million below projections. There is great concern among many legislators that the cuts we have made will not be enough to fix the current revenue shortfall and deeper cuts will have to be made in the Omnibus Budget Bill.

Spending Levels

The FY 2010 State General Fund budget totals \$5.76 billion, a decrease of 6.8 percent below the revised FY 2009 budget.

The FY 2010 All Funds budget totals \$13 billion, a decrease of 3.8 percent below the revised FY 2009 budget.

Mega Budget Bill Summary

This bill includes and uses all federal stimulus funding for Medicaid, public education and higher education. Here are some highlights:

• Public schools remain a top priority for the Legislature:

School took the lowest percentage reduction of all state General Fund programs. \$71 million in additional Title 1 money will put at least five school districts over their previous funding levels.



Ralph Ostmeyer

• State Senator

• Higher education increases \$10.2 million with federal stimulus money included.

• A 1 percent base salary increase and longevity bonus payments to state employees, to be paid through existing funds.

• "Below-market" pay increase for classified state employees fully funded at \$8.5 million.

• Transfers \$5 million for repair of local roads and bridges.

• Second-half of FY 2009 "slider" payment still will be made on June 1. Funding for the FY2010 Business and Machinery Tax Slider will be reconsidered during the debate.

• \$4 million to the Home and Community Based Services Physically Disabled waiver.

• \$1.2 million from a KEY fund transfer to increase the State Children's Health Insurance Program qualifier.

• Additional \$328,465 for primary care/safety net clinics.

• Additional \$355,000 from the General Fund for Pregnancy Maintenance Initiative.

• Makes all federal money for family planning subject to a competitive grant process.

• Agencies will decide how reductions to their budgets will be implemented.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

