

Other Viewpoints

Best, worst time for highway plan

With the state budget in such a mess, you could argue that this either is the worst or the best time for the Legislature to launch another grand transportation plan: the worst because of the tax increases and spending it might involve, the best because of the jobs and infrastructure improvements it would bring.

If state legislators buy the compelling pro-plan argument, they must proceed with caution and foresight.

Any new obligations created by a new transportation program should be accompanied by a funding strategy that doesn't rely on overburdening the state's debt or siphoning the state general fund.

A special House-Senate committee on transportation, which discussed options last week in Topeka, could settle on recommendations next month about the size and funding of a plan. Some advocates want a \$10 billion price tag, scaled back from the \$13 billion program that began in 1999 and expired earlier this year.

Other options include a three- to five-year plan. A smaller effort might concentrate on maintaining what Kansas already has, augmenting the \$375 million a year the state spends to repair existing roads. A new program could have money for airports and passenger rail as well as highways and bridges. Possible money sources include higher fuel taxes and vehicle registration fees. The state motor fuel tax, currently 24 cents a gallon, saw its most recent increase in 2003.

Senate President Steve Morris, R-Hugoton, recently said he could support phasing in a tax increase over several years to pay for a new multiyear transportation plan. Morris told Kansas Public Radio that past plans have been "truly significant on the amount of infrastructure that we've added, the jobs that have been provided and the stimulus to the economy very, very good reasons for passing a comprehensive transportation plan this year."

Others among the GOP leadership also might view a tax increase for a transportation plan as a justifiable user fee.

But such a proposal faces the strong opposition of Americans for Prosperity-Kansas, a conservative group which doubts the claims that transportation projects help the economy.

Despite 20 years of comprehensive transportation plans, the group's state director Derrick Sontag recently told the Associated Press, "We're not kicking Missouri's and Oklahoma's butts when it comes to economic development."

And like it or not, legislators can't separate their transportation planning from the rest of the state budget picture. They might not see a problem with hiking taxes for highways while slashing the budget for schools and social services, but many voters would.

Though advocates are pushing hard, some state leaders likely might judge the revenue and budget problems as too daunting to allow any talk of a transportation plan next year, putting a spotlight on whether Gov. Mark Parkinson makes it a priority.

To be sure, nobody wants to see Kansas' exemplary roads return to the haphazard condition of the years before the state's 1989 transportation plan. But the timing of a new program will be tough, testing state leaders' ability to plan for the future even as they cope with a budget emergency.

— *The Wichita Eagle, via The Associated Press*

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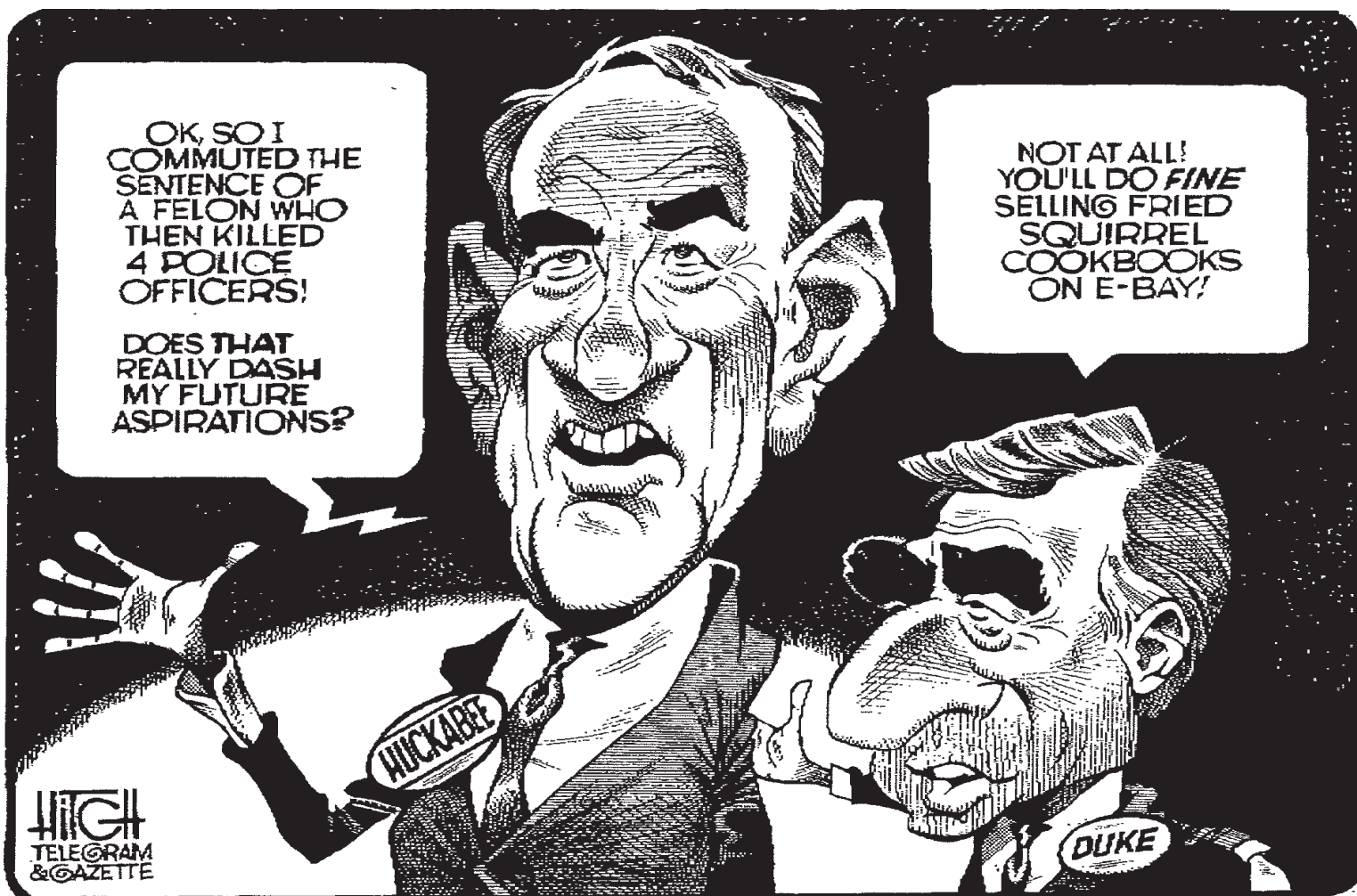
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FROM ONE MIKE TO ANOTHER

Fall time for exploding refrigerators

Fall is in the air, which means it's about time for Cynthia to blow up the refrigerator.

Every year, as the leaves fall and autumn slides into winter, she gets the hankering for hot spiced apple cider. She then runs out and buys the biggest jug of the stuff she can find.

She likes the unpasteurized, unfiltered, "natural" kind best, the kind with lots of sediment and gunk in the bottom of the jar.

She'll go for a big jug, a gallon maybe, in glass or plastic, but preferably old-fashioned glass.

And she'll commence to drinking hot cider, one cup at a time. She buys special spice mixes and things to put in the cider and perk it up. She loves this stuff. Even think it's pretty good, but I have my limits. And I prefer the clear, clean taste of filtered cider with a little tartness, thank you very much.

She'll heat two or three cups the first week and a couple the next. By Christmas, though, she'll have tired of the novelty of spiced cider. She finds that even she has her limits when it comes to hot cider. In short, she loses interest.

And then things start to get a little dicey.

Someone has to watch this stuff in the refrigerator, and that someone tends to be me. I learned this the hard way.

What we think of as cider today is really just apple juice. It's for kids to drink.



Steve Haynes

• Along the Sappa

Cider, in the old-fashioned sense, is fermented apple juice. That means yeast gets into it and make alcohol, or ethanol, the same stuff as in beer, wine, whiskey and gasoline.

And if you ever took chemistry, you know that fermentation creates an excess of one other product: carbon dioxide gas.

So as the juice ferments, it gives off more and more gas, creating pressure in the container unless it's vented.

This is not as much a problem as it once was, since we no longer have children at home. They live elsewhere and are of legal age anyway.

But I can remember more than once the kids complaining about a "funny" taste, but only after downing a glass or two of the cider. In most states, that's not legal.

Then there was the winter she blew up the refrigerator.

We were in the living room, reading when it happened. We hear a small explosion in the

back of the house, nothing real unusual when you have three kids. I was detailed to investigate.

After checking the toilet, the stove and the hot-water heater, I opened the back 'fridge, where we keep stuff like milk, pop and beer. And apple cider.

This jug must have built up some pressure, because it has pretty much blow its top. And its middle, too. There was sticky, alcoholic cider all over everything.

I did make her come help clean it up, and that took some time, wiping unfiltered juice, gunk and all, and glass shards out of the refrigerator and wiping down all the pop and beer, too.

I have to admit, she's never blown up the 'fridge since. Maybe that's because I tend to check the cider and throw it out when it starts to pressurize.

But it was one of the more notable nights of our marriage. The kids were a little disappointed, because they didn't get any of the forbidden fruit juice. But hey, there's always next year, right?

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.

School consolidation back on the table

At the November meeting, the state Board of Education heard a detailed explanation of the figures involved in consolidating Kansas schools.

There would be no huge immediate savings, the board heard. Voluntary consolidation of many of the smallest rural schools is underway. And the issue is in the hands of the Legislature.

In 1945, each Kansas school, out of about 8,000, was a school district. By 1960, this had been cut to 2,600. In 1963, the Legislature set up the unified school district system that gave us 303 districts. Since 2002, voluntary consolidations have reduced that to 293. More small schools are consolidating as rural populations decrease and finances force mergers.

The state board heard a summary of two Kansas consolidation studies (1992 and 2001) and two nationwide studies on rural consolidation (2007) and school size, climate and student performance (1996).

Bigger schools have economies of scale, so expenditures-per-pupil are greater for smaller schools.

	Average Enrollment	Avg. Cost Per Pupil
Top 20 percent	4,044	\$12,498
Next 20 percent	945	12,548
Next 20 percent	539	12,776
Next 20 percent	334	13,409
Bottom 20 percent	175	14,931

Forced consolidation plans (not discussed at the meeting) would reduce the number of Kansas districts, reducing administrative and some teaching staff, and leaving most elementary attendance centers but hubbing the high schools. This would require building new high school capacity and forwarding high-school students, with increased transportation costs.

There would be no immediate savings, since current law maintains school budgets for



John Richard Schrock

• Education Frontlines

three to five years, depending on the size of the districts consolidated. This provision has been a motivation for some recent voluntary consolidations. However, after the initial three to five years, savings remain minor when only two small districts combine to make a slightly larger district.

Large savings, after initial rebuilding, would only be possible when there is a compulsory consolidation that consolidates clusters of small districts, perhaps drawing down to 40-50 regional school districts. And this option, which was not discussed, would only begin to yield savings after this period.

Studies show that nationwide, the educational climate and student performance are better in small schools, dropout rates are lower and social factors are more positive. Dropouts, for instance, are three times more likely to be unemployed or in prison than high school graduates. However, the national comparison with large schools, which includes many inner city schools, may not hold for Kansas, where many large schools—such as those in Johnson County—have low dropout rates and very high college-admission rates.

School districts can be too large, and the 20 largest Kansas districts account for nearly 52 percent of total state school expenditures. Some large schools use school-within-a-school plans to restore group identity and personal attention, probably with varying degrees of success.

On the negative side, there is no more fierce

a battle than a contested school consolidation. Recent consolidations have been voluntary, with heavy public support shown in the required votes. State-imposed consolidation means war, as a community sees its identity threatened. School closure can result in population decline, property devaluation, and diminished local support for the educational system.

The state board appears to have no intention of recommending forced consolidation. Small voluntary consolidations will continue. They will be haphazard and provide no budget relief.

In any case, though, there is a legislative report due Jan. 10.

Five years from now, will Kansans look back at a missed opportunity?

Upon close inspection, few issues are black-and-white. This one is a heavy shade of gray.

John Richard Schrock, a professor of biology and department chair at a leading teacher's college, lives in Emporia. He emphasizes that his opinions are strictly his own.

Write us

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Letters will not be censored, but will be read and edited for form and style, clarity, length and legality.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

