



Free Press Viewpoint

Kansas better off than some others

Everything coming out of Topeka these days is cuts, cuts and more cuts, and it would be easy to feel like we're the only ones who have it bad, but it's just not the case. In fact, we're not even in the top, or rather the bottom, 10.

The Pew Center for the States released a report in November that ranked each state by a variety of factors such as revenue change, unemployment rate change and foreclosure rates. The states at the bottom of the rankings included California, Arizona, Rhode Island and Michigan.

California is squarely at the bottom. Revenue shortfall – something Kansas is currently dealing with – hit California the most out of any state. The state cut its general fund by \$45.5 billion in July and had another deficit of \$1.1 billion in October, all because there is less money coming in.

It was also particularly hit by the falling housing market, with the state's foreclosure rate jumping from 6.8 percent of first mortgages last year to 11.4 percent this year.

The California government, between parties, hasn't been able to fix the problems. Political bickering in the legislature delayed the passage of the state's budget by 85 days, Republicans rejected tax increases and Democrats resisted spending cuts. Voters turned down a proposed \$6 billion tax increase.

Pew gives the state a D- in money management practices, tied for the lowest with Rhode Island. During the 1990s and early 2000s, California increased its spending well beyond the rate of growth in its tax-paying population and did not set aside much in the way of contingency funds.

Arizona was one of the fastest growing states in terms of population, drawing not just snow birds – retirees with a second house somewhere else – but permanent residents as well. Unfortunately that made it susceptible to the housing bust. The foreclosure rate was the highest in the country in the first quarter of 2009 and all the while tax revenue was dropping. According to Pew, the state currently has about \$7 billion coming in to pay for \$10 billion in expenditures.

Rhode Island had several major high-tech companies go bankrupt in 2009. The state had the highest tax rates in New England going into 2006, and unfortunately made massive tax cuts right before the recession hit. The cuts were meant to promote business growth but ended causing revenue shortfalls.

Michigan, of course, was pummeled by the near-collapse of the American auto industry. Trying to make it all work has caused the state government to shut down a few times, and only now have they begun to diversify their economy.

So what does Pew say about Kansas. While it isn't in the ten worst states, at least for the moment, it isn't well off. Overall Kansas has had an 11 percent drop in revenue since 2008, a 2.5 percent rise in unemployment and a .7 percent foreclosure rate. The state is ranked 16th worst and although the report only goes into detail on the top 10, it gives Kansas a B- in money management.

By no stretch of the imagination is Kansas in a good financial spot. But we're not in this alone, and in fact we're better off than a lot of other states. And with so many states in terrible economic straits – Pew lists about 30 that are either strained or in crisis – we might begin to wonder: what will the future look like? Every week it seems new stories come out about an improving economy and an end to the recession. Well in state governments the recession is alive and well.

– Kevin Bottrell



Council's decisions take hard work

After spending well over a year covering city council meetings here in Colby, I have come to appreciate and sympathize with the men and women who make up this group.

Whether you agree or disagree with the policies supported by our councilmen, I can assure you their choices are based on what they feel will best serve the needs of the public.

I don't say this because I support all the policies they vote for, and to be honest I'm not knowledgeable enough to form a confident opinion on many of the issues they discuss. I understand the basic ideas behind most of the bills they pass, but there are some topics where I couldn't tell people with confidence why councilmen A's vote was right and councilmen B's vote was wrong.

I have grown to respect the city council even though I suspect I'm to the left of the council on most national and foreign policy issues. I also doubt any more than one or two of the councilmen voted for President Barack Obama.

Thursday, councilman David Voss and I had a friendly telephone argument about how our health care system should work in this country. Due to time constraints we had to agree to postpone the end of the discussion. I still think there are thousands of people who can't get health care in this country for reasons other than their own irresponsible behavior. But I respect Voss' opinion, and if he can convince me otherwise I will tip my hat to him and concede defeat.

This week the city council voted 4-3 to raise residential water rates from \$10 to \$20 a month for the meter charge and first 3,000 gallons, and raised the charge for every 1,000 gallons after that to \$1.05 starting in January.



Andy Heintz

• Wildcat Ramblings

The council also made similar increases to commercial rates. Council members Beverly Eicher, Patrick Mallory, Raymond Weber and Jim Brown are bound to catch hell from some of their constituents because no one ever likes to have their rates raised, especially during a time when our nation's economy is struggling. And a good case can be made by those who disagreed with the council's vote. An extra \$10 to \$20 a month for water may seem like only a drop in the bucket for some people, but it will not be so easy for people making \$7 to \$8 an hour or people living on a fixed income.

But before you start bombarding the *Colby Free Press* with Letters to the Editor about how some city councilmen are not concerned with the plight of low-income people, I would urge you to be cautious before you start assuming the worst about the people who voted for the increase. I firmly believe the people who voted for the water increase truly believed if they didn't raise rates by \$10 this year, it will only lead to people having to accept an even higher water rate increase next year. And I know they also understood that if they continued charging the same water rates the revenue the received from water users wouldn't be enough to pay for water-related expenditures. Don't get me wrong, I urge those who disagree with the

increase to write letters to the *Free Press* to voice their opinions, but I hope people can do this without indulging in the narrow-minded stereotypes that have become so common in politics.

I have heard arguments from both sides of this issue. Based on the information available to me at the time, I initially supported those who voted for the rate increases, but I have to admit the opposing arguments that councilmen Tim Hutfles and David Voss made to me during telephone interviews were persuasive and really made me think.

Neither Hutfles, Voss or councilman Mark Beringer were against a water rate increase, they were against it being such a large increase all at once. All three councilmen wanted the increase to be phased in incrementally instead of being done all at once to cushion the economic blow dealt to low-income people.

Anyway, the main point of this column is to tell the public that the city council works hard and tries to do what's in the best interests of the city even if some of the town's citizens don't always agree. The council members on both sides of this issue feel they made the best decision for the city as a whole including those who are less well off than most people.

And I agree with Hutfles' views about the importance of people in town serving on the city council.

"Serving on the city council, should be like serving on jury duty," he said. "Everybody should get their turn."

Andy Heintz, a K-State journalism graduate, is sports reporter for the *Colby Free Press*. He says he loves K-State athletics and fishing, sports and opinion writing.

Afghanistan seen as too costly

To the Editor:

In response to Tom Dreiling's editorial of Monday, Nov. 23:

Regarding the safety of our troops in Afghanistan, withdraw them immediately and as quickly and safely as possible. The United States does not have the money to pay for this war, never did have and never will. The federal budget simply does not have the funds to keep having wars in any hemisphere.

Edna A. Hatcher, Colby



Free Press Letter Drop

• Our readers sound off

lowed, and members have an "up-or-down" vote process designed to minimize Congress' role in making these vital decisions to provide political cover for those decisions.

Our committee remains opposed to Congress subcontracting its responsibilities to a 15-member appointed body charged with addressing issues such as Social Security, Medicare and the tax code – policies that touch the lives of every American. Sure, it's a tough job but this is what we've elected them, all of them, to do – isn't it?

We sent a letter to Congress to remind them that Social Security did not create our current federal debt and deficit crisis. Many respected policy analysts join us in opposing this idea. While all of this probably just sounds like more inside-the-beltway wrangling, its implications are huge for millions of American retirees already suffering from an economy that has devastated their savings, home values and retirement security. Commission proponents, like the billion-dollar Pete Peterson Foundation, are pushing for quick enactment of a commission proposal as soon as this winter.

You may or may not know that Pete Peterson spent \$1 billion of his own money to push the demise of Social Security. So, as Mark Twain has said, "We recognize there are no trivial occurrences in life if we get the right focus on them."

Edna A. Hatcher, Colby

Don't cut seniors out

To the Editor:

At one time Congress banned Mark Twain's books, so I've diligently collected his saying. Regarding the present state of affairs, this one popped up from "Autobiography II."

"We recognize there are no trivial occurrences in life if we get the right focus on them."

I'm focusing on "commissions," which I do not think should do the work of Congress. This was done during the Clinton and Bush administrations and was extremely ineffective.

I see by the Nov. 10 National Committee to Preserve Social Security blog (www.ncpsm.org) that there are plans for "fast-tracking cuts to Social Security and Medicare." The Senate Budget Committee heard testimony Nov. 10 on plans by Chairman Kent Conrad and ranking member Sen. Judd Gregg to "renegotiate our social contract," as David Walker testified. Under a fast-track rule, no amendments are al-

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: jmorrison@ink.org

State Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer, State Capitol Building, 300 SW 10th 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
Kevin Bottrell - News Editor
kbottrell@nwkansas.com

Andy Heintz - Sports Reporter
aheintz@nwkansas.com

Marian Ballard - Copy Editor
mballard@nwkansas.com

Vera Sloan and Aubrey Spencer - Society Editors
colby.society@nwkansas.com

ADVERTISING
Heather Woofter - Advertising Representative
hwoofter@nwkansas.com

Andrea Miller - Advertising Representative
a.miller@nwkansas.com

Shaly Niemeier - Advertising Representative
sniemeier@nwkansas.com

Kathryn Ballard - Graphic Design
kballard@nwkansas.com

BUSINESS OFFICE
Robin Tubbs - Office Manager
rtubbs@nwkansas.com

Evan Barnum - Systems Administrator
support@nwkansas.com

NOR'WEST PRESS
Richard Westfahl - General Manager

Lana Westfahl, Jim Jackson, Betty Morris, Jim Bowker, Judy McKnight, Barbara Ornelas, Tasha Shores, Kris McCoil

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, Thomas County and Oakley: three months \$35, one year \$85. By mail to ZIP Codes beginning with 676 and 677: three months \$39, one year \$95. Elsewhere in the U.S., mailed once per week: three months \$39, one year \$95. Student rate, nine months, in Colby, Thomas County and Oakley, \$64; mailed once per week elsewhere in the U.S. \$72

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

