



## Free Press Viewpoint

### Legislature must cut its budget now

The governor has the Republicans running the Legislature this time, and they're going to have to admit it. With a wry smile, Gov. Mark Parkinson, a Democrat, called on the leadership to cut its own budget the way some members are threatening to cut everyone else's.

What else can the GOP members do? The Associated Press reported this week that proposals submitted to Gov. Parkinson's office by the legislative leadership projected spending up 4 percent this year and 3 percent next year.

The leadership sent up a howl. They said the figures represent projected needs, a wish list, not what they planned to spend — just like every other state agency.

One House leader noted that the governor's budget has been growing, too, but his office has taken over grant programs from other agencies in the last couple of years. It may not be able to cut back to 2006 levels, as public schools have been forced to do.

The governor changed course this fall and came out in favor of a tax increase to keep schools and other programs from suffering further cuts next year. Basically, he said, the fat is gone from state spending. Further cuts will hurt.

Legislators have been cutting their own spending along with schools, colleges and prisons. Leaders say they are prepared to do again what they did in fiscal 2009, when they slashed spending below 2008 levels.

Still, there's no room in the budget for any increases. The budget hawks on the Republican side should know they have to lead by example. It was poor form to even submit a wish list.

And there certainly is no excuse for even considering any increase in pay, either for state employees or the Legislature itself. With thousands of Kansans unable to find jobs, how can families afford a tax increase to pay for raises?

The governor appears to favor an increase in the tobacco tax, the Associated Press reported, though there's been talk of hiking the sales tax or at least eliminating some "loopholes."

School and colleges are important. So are prisons and parole officers, highways and a host of other things the state does. But when Kansas families are having trouble making ends meet and Kansas businesses scrape just to meet payroll, can they afford to pay the state more?

Pressure for a tax increase from well-organized lobbies, including school boards and teachers, state employees and those who use state programs, will be tremendous.

But before the battle starts, let's rule out any increase for the Legislature, the governor's office and other elected officials. Any pay increases at all.

And do as Kansans everywhere are doing — do more with less.

— Steve Haynes

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### House-breaking a new family pet

She whirred. She skidded. She ran into the wall.

Soon our new addition was running across the living room floor. Cats scattered, jumping for chairs and sofas. Ceramic shepherds in the nativity set on the floor by the fireplace went tumbling. Stray piles of newspapers, of which we have more than our share, got shoved aside and scattered.

Merry Christmas, darling. Meet Winky, the Roomba.

A Roomba is a vacuum-cleaning robot. It looks a lot like a bathroom scale, but when you push the button on top, it takes off on its tiny wheels, racing across the floor, sucking up dirt and pet hair — another thing of which we have more than our share.

They're made by a company called iRobot, which also makes robots for the military and for police bomb squads. And, closer to my heart, robots that scrub floors. And the one Steve wants, that cleans gutters by remote control from the ground.

As is our holiday tradition, we opened our presents right after church on Christmas Eve. This year, there weren't many to open, however.

Son came home for Christmas bringing us each a gift, and there was the box with Winky. Everything else was either a food product or a



**Cynthia Haynes**

• Open Season

gift that didn't require wrapping, like donations in our name to a charity. Son's present, we delivered to him in Lawrence a couple of weeks earlier, and his sisters' present to him was several rounds of golf at the country club there, a present that is also kinda hard to wrap.

We opened our packages and smiled at the 1968 KU yearbook he had gotten his Dad, and the photo box he got me. Yes, kid, we really did look that dorky. And that young.

Then we all opened the Roomba and started to figure her out.

Assembly was pretty easy, and before long we were looking for a spot to plug in her dock, the part that provides a home and food for the little machine.

By Christmas morning, she was charged up and charging around the kitchen, dining room and living room, where she had the unfortunate encounter with the shepherds. Her little dirt catcher was soon clogged with hair and

sand, and the boys got to figure out how to clean her out.

In the meantime, I was trying to come up with a name. Roombas just gotta have a name, because they're half machine and half pet.

After watching her antics for awhile, I knew who she was but I had to call my son-in-law in Georgia to come up with the name of the drunken little female house elf in the Harry Potter books. My new little pet was female and bounced around the house like a drunken elf. She was definitely a Winky.

On Saturday, we set her to work on the upstairs, where she picked up tons of hair and carpet lint, got stuck under the bed twice, the dresser once and just plain ran out of juice once. We emptied her bin, cleaned her brushes, let her feed at her dock and turned her loose — again and again.

The newness will wear off, I'm sure, but I love my Winky. The cats aren't nearly so sure about the noisy little invader, but at least she can't get onto the chairs and sofas.

Not yet, anyway.

Cynthia Haynes, co-owner and chief financial officer of Nor'West Newspapers, writes this column weekly. Her pets include cats, toads and a praying mantis. Contact her at c.haynes@nwkans.com

### Write us

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### The Kansas education crisis is real

Amazingly, a few folks still assert that Kansas has no statewide funding crisis for public schools.

It's difficult to argue that the crisis is all smoke and no fire when flames are visible around us. In this last month, many school districts across Kansas have held public meetings to discuss how to handle the lack of money. The last cut of \$38 million to public schools for the 2009-2010 year places districts in a position of owing contracted teachers more than the state will pay.

With state tax revenue declining, the cash is not there. General state funds due to schools Nov. 1 went out late, half on Nov. 6 and the other half on Dec. 2. The payout due Dec. 1 was half paid on Dec. 4, with the other half to be paid Dec. 30. A special education payout due Dec. 15 will be made in January.

Some schools had saved limited reserves from prior years, but except for a few rich districts, those rainy day funds will soon be exhausted. To get through just this month, many schools that had money in dedicated "silos" meant for designated purposes had to rob those "silos" to make mid-December payroll — something that you aren't supposed to do — and then replenish those funds with the next state payout.

The state Department of Education surveyed schools: About 10 districts did not have any such resources to make payroll in mid-December. The department tried to arrange a late but



**John Richard Schrock**

• Education Frontlines

earlier-than-others payout.

The second assertion is, schools cut money and teachers but they're still operating, so that proves the schools didn't need that money. That argument should ring hollow to many across Kansas who are in other businesses that laid off workers. The remaining factory workers are working overloads, raw materials and stock are being drawn down, and repairs are being deferred, making future conditions hazardous.

The same is happening in schools. Kansas schools lost over 3,700 employees between last spring and this fall and more layoffs are underway. Class sizes continue to grow as fewer teachers now cover the load — especially worrisome in lower grades, where larger class size means less attention and a fallback in reading scores.

\$6.6 million has been "saved" by delaying purchase of new textbooks — students will be re-using books six to seven years old or more. Not upgrading school buses "saved" \$7.2 million — but more old school buses will be on

the road. Some districts that transported all students outside a one-mile radius have now pulled back. Their students may have to walk up to 2 1/2 miles.

The pipeline of teaching talent is also hit by this constriction. Except in a few shortage areas, good student teachers will have difficulty finding jobs. And good rookie teachers were laid off because they were not tenured. This talent will find jobs elsewhere. The longer this funding crisis continues, the fewer will return to teaching.

The last cut of \$2 million to higher education and \$38 million to public schools brings Kansas to the funding floor of 2006 to receive federal stimulus money. Any further cuts and we have to send big bags of money back to Washington.

In the worst cases, some Kansas school districts may face either issuing "no-fund warrants" to borrow money or be forced to in to consolidation.

The next time you hear someone assert that Kansas schools have oodles of money hidden away, feel free to ask them just what part of this education funding crisis they do not understand.

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.

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