



Other Viewpoints

Prison numbers can't be ignored

As if Kansas lawmakers didn't face enough challenges in the upcoming session, now comes word that the state's population of male prison inmates is over capacity.

Worse yet, projections call for the corrections system to be 2,000 beds short in 10 years unless something is done.

The options? Pump more money into the system or find a way to reduce the population, possibly by moving up the release dates for prisoners who've displayed good behavior.

Neither choice is likely to thrill state lawmakers — or, for that matter, many Kansans.

Finding more money for corrections would be a tall order, considering the state of the economy, and proposals to lighten up on offenders are rarely popular.

But officials say something needs to be done, and the numbers suggest they're right.

Last week, the male prison population hit 8,411 in a system with a capacity of 8,259.

And while the prison population is down nationwide, due to a number of reasons, the trend in Kansas is going the other way — and fast. A story Oct. 10 in *The Kansas City Star* said the number of incoming inmates jumped 13 percent in the fiscal year that ended in June....

Meanwhile, reductions in state funding to the Department of Corrections prompted officials to eliminate programs aimed at keeping parolees from returning to the system. That segment of the population declined drastically in recent years, helping Kansas keep a handle on its system without building new prisons, but officials fear there will be another influx of returning inmates unless the programs are rebooted.

For now, the increase in prison population is being fueled mostly by first-time inmates.

Corrections officials are heading into the session seeking money for the parolee programs, as well as more money to house inmates elsewhere.

Managing the state prison population is always a delicate balancing act, and this year it will be trickier than usual.

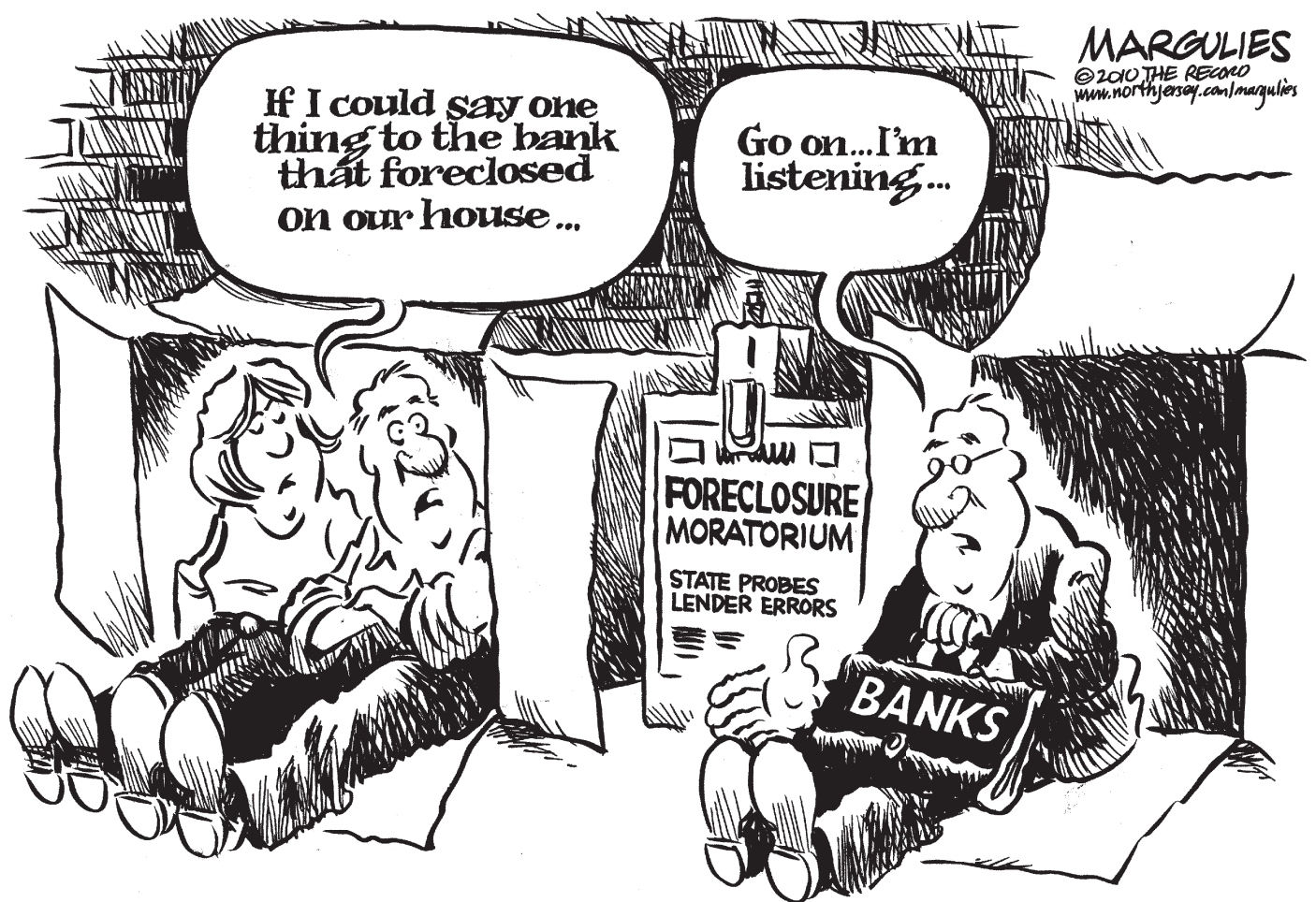
Legislation in previous sessions to put more teeth in sentencing guidelines was appropriate, especially as it applied to repeat offenders. The reduction in money to the prison system also was justified.

But now, lawmakers will face a tough task in bringing the population back under control.

The concept of early release sounds good in theory, but in practice it's apt not to sit very well with many crime victims. Restoration of money for parolee programs sounds good, too, until you consider the state's budget problems and the fact that the corrections budget rose from \$243 million in 2005 to \$279 million in 2010.

There will undoubtedly be a lot of ideas about how to deal with the situation, but throwing money at it isn't an option. Legislators should look for ways to maximize efficiency in corrections operations while also considering early release options.

— *The Topeka Capitol-Journal, via the Associated Press*



Deregulation won't fix our problems

There is no doubt that Americans have always distrusted government.

We have always been a country that takes pride in rugged individualism.

But even when you taken into consideration America's historic dedication to individualism, it's still hard to understand the reasoning of some segments of the American public. Despite the deepening inequality that has occurred over the past couple decades and the massive fraud stemming from deregulation, Republicans are still committed to tax cuts and deregulation.

Republican Congressman Jerry Moran expressed what appears to be the mainstream opinion in his party when he chastised government for the burdensome regulations it's putting on Kansas businesses in an article featured in the *Colby Free Press* on Thursday. He laments the fact that for too long, Washington has increased the regulatory burdens on businesses at the expense of American workers.

We must keep in mind that he's talking about a country that has just gotten through experiencing a mining tragedy, an ecological disaster, a massive food recall and an economic catastrophe partly caused by deregulatory policies. But apparently the cure for these disasters is yet more deregulation. This is similar to somebody explaining why eating more Big Macs at McDonalds is a surefire way to solve America's obesity problem.

Conservatives always fashion themselves as the champions of small businesses, but



Andy Heintz

• Wildcat Ramblings

not all small business owners seem to agree. While many anti-tax activists, such as Grover Norquist, have warned that letting the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy expire will be a "body blow to the small business community," folks like Fred Knapp, corporate executive and president of the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce, disagree with Norquist's assertions.

"Boosting our local economy by helping real small businesses create jobs should be our goal," Knapp said. "We can either cut taxes for CEOs and Wall Street traders, or we can invest the money to generate more customers for small businesses by keeping teachers, police officers and other Americans on the job rebuilding the crumbling transportation, water and energy infrastructure that small business depends on."

It's also important to understand that the overwhelming majority of small business owners don't earn enough money — \$200,000 a year for individuals and \$250,000 a year for couples — to be affected by letting the Bush tax cuts expire. The argument that the people at top of the economic ladder are the ones who

keep small businesses thriving is controversial at best, and ludicrous (the word, not the rapper) at worst.

"Expecting high-end tax cuts to trickle down as job creation is about as reasonable as pouring gasoline on your hood and expecting it to fuel your car," said Lew Prince, owner of Vintage Vinyl, an independent music store.

Other small business owners have criticized the decline in public investment and infrastructure that strengthens local economies. It's worth noting that the Society of Civil Engineers recently gave America's infrastructure a D and estimated it would take \$2 trillion in upgrades and repairs to fix the problem.

Ezra Klein of *Newsweek* reports that the construction sector is currently facing 17 percent unemployment. A logical solution to both of these problems is to let the tax cuts expire and use the money to invest in our nation's infrastructure. This would not only put people back to work, it would also help solve a problem that has been hurting small and large business alike.

Businesses will not thrive in our nation if our infrastructure continues to crumble. And if our infrastructure collapses, fiscal hawks will no longer have to worry about the deficit, because we will have an even bigger problem on our hands.

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.

Blame farmers? Take responsibility

File this under the category of the lamest excuse to come along in my lifetime.

What I'm talking about are the recent attempt by some in the media and entertainment business to blame America's farm and ranch families for the growing epidemic of obesity. Seems they would like us to believe that farmers and ranchers are producing food that is too affordable and too available.

Stop right there. Many Americans can remember a time when their families or neighbors had trouble keeping food on the table. The concept of food that was too cheap was as foreign as paying nearly a buck and a half for a soda.

But the times they are a-changing. Americans' incomes have increased, and farmers are producing food more efficiently than ever before. That means food costs take a smaller bite out of Americans' pocketbooks than ever.

Rather than thank farmers for producing abundant, affordable food so that most of us will never experience the pangs of hunger, making farmers the scapegoat for obesity appears to be a popular trend. Some also say federal programs that help stabilize the farm economy encourage farmers to overproduce. Blaming agriculture only diverts attention away from the factors that do contribute to obesity.

Some media types may think they are performing a public service, but singling out farmers is a serious disservice to one of our nation's most important industries. It also is a slap in the face to the thousands of families that depend on agriculture for their livelihoods and to the millions of Americans whose high standards of living are built on our varied and efficient food and fiber system.

Without our nation's farmers and the federal



John Schlageck

• Insights

Kansas Farm Bureau

programs that help them through economic and weather disasters, Americans might have to depend on other countries for food just like we already do for oil. That would be a kick in the backside not only to our food supply, but our national security as well.

Recent evidence of a global obesity trend indicates that the problem involves more than access to and an abundance of snack foods, desserts and soft drinks. People are reportedly getting heavier even in developing nations, where citizens do not have all of the foods and snacks found on our supermarket shelves. That tends to point toward rising incomes and less physical labor around the world as the cause, not just U.S. food industry practices.

Since when do farmers grow junk food? When did farmers begin to force consumers to eat a specific diet, healthy or otherwise?

Farmers and ranchers are not responsible for the U.S. consumer's dietary and exercise habits. These are all individual choices and matters of personal responsibility.

We must also consider the constantly on-the-go lifestyles Americans now lead. This also helps the fast food and vending machine industries turn a profit. And what about our technology boom that encourages kids to sit in front of the television or play video games and working their jaws (snacking) instead of exercising outdoors?

Recent statistics show Americans spend an average of more than 1,700 hours a year in their car, at their computer or in front of their television screens.

Whatever happened to personal responsibility in this country? What about the amount of food we eat at each meal? How about the many times we eat between meals? How about the individual holding the knife, fork or spoon? Used to be a time, I can remember, when people didn't eat between meals, or is that a long and distant dream?

It is time we start looking for real solutions to fix America's growing weight problem, instead of blaming the very hands that nutritiously and safely feed America. It's important to note that while farmers produce a wide range of healthy food options, the ultimate consumer choices — moderation and exercise — are made far beyond the farm or ranch.

John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. He grew up on a diversified farm near Seguin, and his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.

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Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

