



Free Press  
Viewpoint

‘Earmark’ symbol  
good place to start

A wire-service story on the Republican plan to ban “earmarks,” that peculiar congressional perk which allows members to set aside millions for pet projects, maintains the ban will do no good.

It’s just window dressing, the “experts” argue; eliminating earmarks won’t keep Congress from spending our money or from directing it to their districts.

And while that may be true, a ban on the much-abused earmarks would be a start to reforming Congress and cutting down on federal spending. It will take more, much more, to get Washington under control.

“It’s a symbol,” said one former Congressman turned lobbyist. But symbols are important. If people are tired of ever-growing government spending, they need to see some progress.

The truth is, earmarks are only a small part of the picture. Lack of discipline is the biggest problem: Members of Congress gain by spending money and offend pressure groups when they cut budgets. There’s no force that pushes them to cut spending, except of course the voters.

But voter behavior is contradictory. We say we want less spending and smaller government, but in the same breath demand that our own “pet” programs be spared the ax. And every program is someone’s pet.

Every program has a pressure group that protects it – farm groups for farm subsidies, senior citizen groups for Social Security, business groups for tax breaks, and so on. Organized lobbying groups put direct pressure on Congress. Dispersed voter movements like the “tea party” are effective only when they actually affect winning and losing, as they did this year.

But by the next election, the tea party may have faded or weakened. The lobbyists will still be in Washington, still be expending campaign money, still be influencing votes.

Citizens who want lower spending, a balanced budget and cuts to major programs first need to realize that it will take some courage for members to vote against the pressure groups. Fear of losing office is the only thing that will create it.

And voters will have to agree to cuts in some sacred cows, first among them Social Security. No one is talking about benefit cuts, understand, but trimming planned increases and raising the retirement age.

Even that will take a fight.

Every program has someone defend it, someone who benefits. The government can be changed, but not without an upheaval. Not without cost. And not without agreement that we need to bring fiscal sanity to Washington.

A balanced-budget amendment would be a good start. So would a plan to save Social Security from bankruptcy. So, in fact, would be an end to earmarks. It might be symbolic, but symbols can be powerful.

So why not try it? – *Steve Haynes*

Write us

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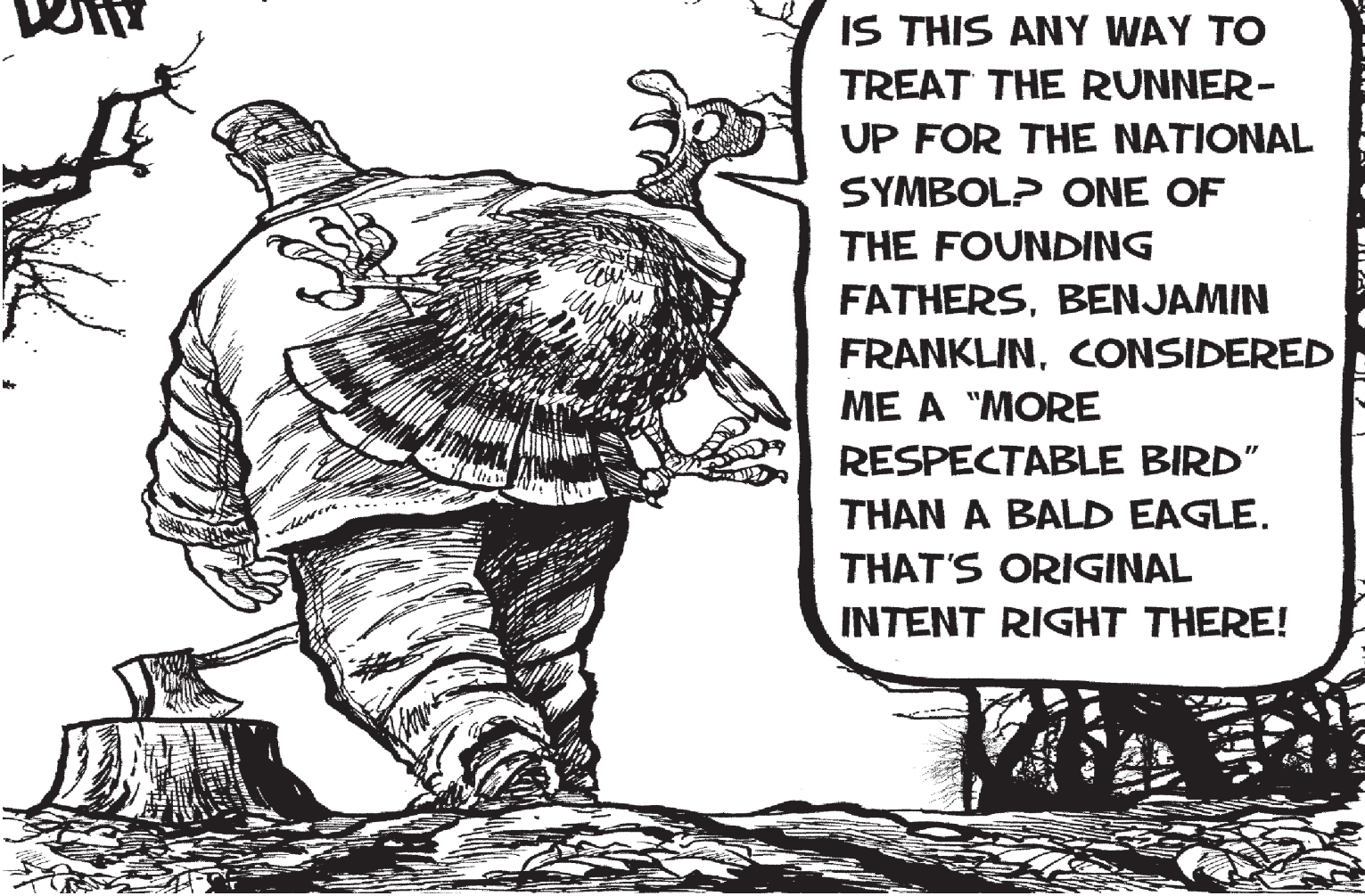
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Cramped holiday an expansive memory

Since Thanksgiving is approaching, I’ve tried to think of my most memorable holidays.

The New Year’s Eve we spent at a funeral home comes to mind.

Then there was the Christmas when my baby sister got sick and tore off all her clothes, screaming that there were bugs in them. Bugs with feathers on their tails sort of tipped Mom and Dad off that this was not an insect infestation. The doctor came to the house and gave her a penicillin shot.

That was a looooooong time ago.

Little sister is now well past 50 and doing just fine.

Then there is Thanksgiving.

The only thing I really remember about Thanksgiving at home is that Dad didn’t like turkey and he loved to hunt. We usually had pheasant, quail and rabbit on the table instead of the iconic bird. Only when my aunt came from Kansas City for the holidays and we went to Gramma and Grandpa’s, did we have turkey. Then I had to sit on a piano stool and eat at the card table with the rest of the children.

More memorable, I guess, is the year Steve and the kids and I went to Wyoming to spend the holiday with oldest daughter.

This was her first Thanksgiving away from



Cynthia Haynes

• Open Season

home, so we packed up her two younger siblings and set out for Casper, Wyo., about an eight-to-nine-hour drive when the weather co-operates.

This was daughter’s first apartment, since she had spent her entire college career living in the dorms at the University of Colorado.

It was a small one-bedroom place, sparsely furnished. We slept on a futon, her sister slept with her and her brother got the couch.

Fixing a big holiday meal in her efficiency kitchen was an adventure. The oven was barely big enough for the turkey, let alone stuffing, pies and green-bean casserole.

I don’t remember how we did it, but we did it. Thanksgiving turkey, mashed potatoes, green beans, stuffing, cranberry sauce and a pumpkin pie were all set out in her tiny place. This took me back to my youth, since there was no dining room and Thanksgiving was

once again served on a card table.

Then there was this photographer who had to work Thanksgiving, so she invited him over for supper. The six of us sat on the couch or floor eating with one hand and using the other to shoo off her two cats, which were trying to help themselves.

It was a fun and memorable feast, and after dinner we watched a football game on her 12-inch black-and-white television.

This year, Steve and I will go to the community Thanksgiving feed and eat with others who have no family or don’t want to bother making a big meal.

Oldest daughter will be having her sister, brother-in-law, niece, mother-in-law, father-in-law, five friends and the photographer, who married her many year ago, at her Thanksgiving table. They’ll eat at a real table with real chairs and watch football on a huge flat-screen television. But first, they’ll have to fend off the four cats, which are trying to help themselves. Some things never change.

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 @ nwkansas.com

Tax exemptions hurt cities, counties

By Rachel Whitten

Kansas Reporter

The Kansas Advisory Council on Intergovernmental Relations discussed strategies Friday to help cities and counties garner revenue to be recommend to the Legislature.

Kansas passed a statewide sales-tax increase last year to help stabilize state revenues, and now cities and counties say they want to balance their budgets by ending tax exemptions instead.

That was the general consensus at a Kansas Advisory Council on Intergovernmental Relations meeting in Topeka. The council is a state-supported body formed to be an intermediary between the state government and cities and counties.

Joan Wagon, Kansas secretary of revenue, said because of the state’s budget and revenue constraints, local governments shouldn’t count on receiving state aid.

But she said her understanding of the general attitude of local leaders across the state is they’re not favorable to increasing the property taxes from which the majority of local revenue traditionally comes.

“Because of budget consolidations, there won’t be aid to local units of government, and they have no appetite for property tax increases,” Wagon said.

“So we need to be engaged in what local governments are going to do. They can’t just keep going, and there’s no expectation that they can continue to just tighten their belts.”

The council will make its final recommendations to the Legislature around the end of the year. But one issue the group wants to emphasize is repealing sales tax exemptions, especially for specific named entities rather than broad types of industries.

“Exemptions given by name are inappropriate,” Wagon said.

According to State Sen. Tim Owens, a Republican from Overland Park who represents the Legislature on the council, Kansas has \$4.3 billion per year in sales tax exemptions, and roughly \$1.3 billion of that is for organizations whose exempt status might be ripe for review.

Those sales-tax exemptions are unfair for local governments, Wagon said, because they erode a government’s taxable base without giving the city or county a choice in the matter.

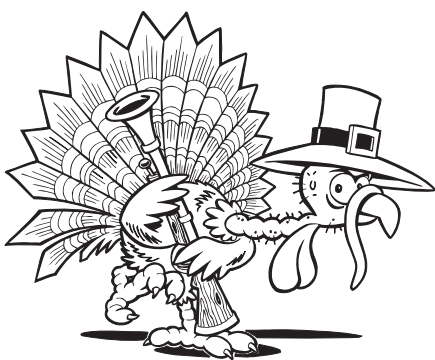
“It’s a problem when you exempt things suddenly and take away the tax base and they don’t have a voice in it,” Wagon said.

Other types of tax exemptions hurt local governments, too, according to the council’s recent Local Government Funding Survey.

The survey found that 213 of 331 local leaders said it would help them to be able to opt out of property tax exemptions. Meanwhile, 118 local officials said it wouldn’t help their county.

Wagon said she hoped the survey would help prompt a discussion in the Legislature about tax exemptions passed by the state and how they affect local governments.

Rachel Whitten is a reporter for KansasReporter.org, an online news service of the Kansas Policy Institute. She has previously worked as a free-lance reporter for the Topeka Capital-Journal and the Killeen Daily-Herald.



Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

