



Free Press Viewpoint

State arts budget hardly a real need

The wailing and gnashing of teeth has begun. Supporters of state programs about to feel Gov. Sam Brownback's budget ax have begun whining, and the wail will reach epic proportions before the spending bills are done.

Every program has its supporters, of course. Usually, they're organized by the people who work for the programs. Thus, a couple of years ago when Republicans proposed changes (not cuts) in spending for federal lunch programs for senior citizens, cards were passed out and speeches made at senior lunches. Congress dropped the change like a hot potato.

On the block in Kansas, where the state faces a \$570 million revenue "shortfall" next year, are the budgets for the state arts commission and public broadcasting. Supporters already are howling. However, it's hard to make a case for a real need here.

Performing arts and broadcasting are not in short supply. Mass-appeal providers saturate the markets with material, some of it pretty good, a lot of it pretty awful. People pay to see both kinds.

Public support for the arts and broadcasting tends to buy the type of show people won't pay for. We sympathize with people who might miss some of these programs, but it's hard to make a case for spending tax money on programs, live or broadcast, that few people want to see.

Tax money, after all, is not freely given. It is taken from people by force of law, and if necessary, by force of arms. If you do not believe that, try not paying your taxes.

That means government has a special responsibility to see that tax money is spent on things most of us agree on. For state government, roads, public safety, schools and colleges, health, welfare and a few others meet that definition.

It's hard for us to put performance, live or broadcast, into the same category. These programs tend to appeal to a minority, most of whom could afford to buy their own tickets. The morality of taxing poor people to finance programs for such an elite minority is questionable, to say the least. Especially when the state has no money.

These programs have produced some good work, but it's time for Kansas to let them go. It's also the right thing to do.

— Steve Haynes

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Cost of open records a growing concern

Have you ever met a politician who didn't believe in open government?

We used to talk about the importance of shining light on our institutions of government, making sure that what they were doing was above-board, out in the open and not in smoke-filled rooms.

My, how times have changed. The "smoke-filled room" is a thing of the past, thanks to new laws, or in some cases, simple good taste.

And the new catchword that has replaced "sunshine" is "transparency."

It's difficult to get through an entire day without an officeholder blurting out that term at least half a dozen times.

Of course, "transparency" is often in the eye of the beholder.

For instance, in Topeka, the *Capital-Journal* is fighting the police chief and county sheriff to get to records of an incident in which a police officer and an off-duty sheriff's deputy had a confrontation. It's been days since the incident, but mum's the word.

Transparency apparently is only a good thing if it involves ordinary citizens, not those who are hired to enforce the law.

It's not the first time the *Topeka Capital-Journal* has had to get tough with its local governments to find out what they should have been sharing with the public.

At the Kansas Press Association, we're witnessing a growing attitude of arrogance on the part of many of our elected officials. It seems they, and only they, know best what informa-

Other Opinions

● **Doug Anstaett**
Kansas Press Association

tion the public should see, and they're making it tougher and tougher to get at the kind of information that in past years was routinely made public.

We have newspapers that have to fight for access to the packets that elected officials are perusing during meetings, and they're running into significant roadblocks.

In one community, officials have threatened to yank the official legal status of a newspaper because it published details of the salary increases for two employees while everyone else was asked to go without this year.

One issue that has become quite serious is the cost of obtaining public records.

Not a week passes at our office or at our lawyer's office that a reporter doesn't call with a question about the fees being charged by government offices for routine records of city, county and school-district business.

Often, the charges that are levied are way out of line; certainly they are all over the board.

Now, some newspapers can afford to pay for the cost of copying a record, but it's becoming more common for the cost of a public employee's time to be factored into the equation.

Sometimes, such an additional charge is justified, especially when the records are hard to locate or might be stored at a different location.

But we're finding more and more that these fees appear to be aimed at making sure a reporter, or an ordinary citizen, thinks twice before pursuing the request.

An attorney general's opinion several years ago listed the figure of 25 cents per page as a reasonable charge.

Today, most records are electronic in nature, so the cost of copying should have dropped dramatically.

Even so, for a citizen with limited funds, these added charges can be the difference between getting needed records and heading home without them.

We think our public officials have somehow forgotten that the records they are charging the public to copy were paid for by the public in the first place.

The kinds of horror stories we're hearing from our members indicate to me that the charges are sometimes designed to discourage citizens from seeking records.

When the cost of obtaining a record becomes too expensive, that record may as well be closed.

Doug Anstaett of Topeka is executive director of the Kansas Press Association. He is a former Kansas editor and publisher, and a prize-winning editorial writer.

Budget, liquor, arts on the table

This week as we celebrate the 150th anniversary of Kansas' statehood it's also a time to reflect on the history of our state and appreciate its role in the evolving state of our nation.

2011 Session, week three

The main focus of this session will be addressing the \$550 million state budget deficit and repairing the Kansas economy. The first step is House Bill 2014 which freezes the state budget for the 2011 fiscal year. The bill makes approximately \$120 million in cuts, orders several funding transfers and would create a \$35 million surplus in the State General Fund for this fiscal year. Last week the House Appropriations Committee held hearings and began working on amendments. I anticipate the bill making its way out of committee soon, ready for a full vote sometime next week.

I am hopeful HB2014 is quickly approved so we can freeze state spending and focus on the larger task of filling the \$550 million budget hole. Fixing the budget involves a number of controversial measures, but I remain confident that we will find a way to improve the Kansas economy and solve this budget crisis.

Expanded Liquor Sales

This week legislation was introduced that would allow grocery and convenience stores to sell full-strength alcoholic beverages. Currently, gas stations, grocery stores and convenience stores are limited to selling 3.2 beer and wine coolers. Senate Bill 54 would also allow liquor stores, currently limited to selling alcoholic beverages, to sell food, gas and other items.

This is not the first time this legislation has been introduced. There are two sides to the story and both have valid viewpoints. I would



Rick Billinger

● Capitol Review

appreciate your opinion. Your feedback always helps me.

Arts Commission Funding

Many constituents have contacted me to express concern over the restructuring of the Kansas Arts Commission. There is no question the non-profit arts and cultural sector is a growing market in Kansas. However, as we face revenue declines we must restructure government while focusing on essential services. We must determine whether programs preserve a "core function" of government.

The governor's plan to restructure the commission as a non-profit is a viable option. Vermont has successfully adopted a non-profit structure for their arts commission and several other states are contemplating similar proposals. The National Endowment for the Arts, which provides federal money for the commission, has threatened to cut off funding. However, the original legislation for the endowment has been thoroughly reviewed and no requirement for state matching funds has been found.

While this will continue to be an issue of concern, rest assured I am committed to ensuring the arts do not suffer. I am confident that the restructuring of the commission will allow it to remain whole.

Commerce & Economic Development

Last week we heard testimony on HB2088, which deals with fire sprinkler systems in residential homes. HB2088 will leave it up to home owners whether or not they want to install sprinklers in their homes. It will go to the house floor sometime this week. We also have been working on HB2054 which will abolish the Kansas Technology Enterprise Corporation. These services will be assumed by the Department of Commerce and the Board of Regents.

Education

We have been working on several bills in the Education Committee. HB2016 concerns weighting in school districts. HB2017 relates to enrollment of students eligible for free meals under the National School Lunch Act. HB2018 relates to school finance; it has to do with "High Density At-Risk Pupil" weighting. HB2020 deals with recent schools affording educational institutions the option to utilize the housing system suspense fund.

As always, if possible, take the time to visit Topeka this session. If you would like an individual meeting, I'd be happy to arrange one. In the meantime, I'm always anxious to hear your thoughts on how the issues in Topeka affect you. Feedback is important in making sure I'm accurately representing my friends and neighbors in the district. Please feel free to call me at (785) 296-7659 or (785) 899-4700 or e-mail me at: Rick.Billinger@house.ks.gov.

Rick Billinger is the state representative from the 121st District. He currently serves on the Commerce and Economic Development, Education Funding, Insurance and Local Government committees.

Mallard Fillmore

● **Bruce Tinsley**

