



Free Press Viewpoint

Reality intrudes; budget cuts go on

Kansas faces continuing budget cuts. That's reality for the next couple of years.

A wail and cry can be heard across the state as people realize that "their" state programs face the ax.

And every program benefits someone or some group.

Yet the fact is, the state is broke, and has been for at least three years. In good times, the Legislature and governor spent everything that came in. They cut taxes. Pressured by the courts, they poured more than \$1 billion into schools without much thought. Social programs, roads, salaries, all soaked up whatever was left.

When the crunch came, the state had no reserves, no "savings account" or rainy-day fund to fall back on.

And so the last governor, though he liked to spend, started cutting. That continues today with Gov. Sam Brownback, and it remains a painful process. No one thinks it's much fun. It's just that the state isn't collecting even the reduced income it planned for this year.

And when the state is out of money, unlike the federal government, it has to stop spending.

Schools may be cut the most this year and next, because for most of the recession, schools were held above the fray. That lasted until the federal stimulus money being used to prop the state budget up went away. Now, schools must face reality.

Some schools already support another lawsuit to force the state to spend more. The only way that can happen is with a tax increase, and we'd guess not even our liberal Supreme Court will want to order the Legislature to hike taxes.

Schools are the biggest target, but cuts to any program raise a howl. The governor tried to cut all money for the Kansas Arts Commission. Supporters raised a ruckus, and the state Senate voted to block the governor's reorganization order.

The arts situation is a good illustration of what happens. Its state budget is only about \$813,000 per year, just a drop in the bucket. The governor proposed that the agency continue as a private foundation under the state Historical Society, capable of raising money and taking federal grants, then sending the money out to communities. Rather than get behind that effort, however, supporters hope to preserve the agency as it is, protecting thousands in grants to local arts commissions.

Arts grants go to support programs that generally lack broad public support, or someone would be doing them. Backers usually come from the educated elite, people who could afford to support these events. Yet they insist the only way Kansas can have arts is to tax those who don't care – or may not be able to afford it.

And that's not right.

Every program, from senior-citizen lunches to truck inspection, has its backers. The more employees a program has, of course, the more backers.

It's not that any of them is without value. Schools certainly are important. So are roads, colleges, technical schools, restaurant inspections, you name it.

But the state is still broke. It has less money than people want it to spend, far less. The Legislature and governor will have to make hard choices.

It's OK for everyone to advocate for "their" programs. But when the decisions are made, everyone should get behind them and remember that the state cannot, should not and must not spend money it doesn't have. — *Steve Haynes*

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Torn safety net needs big repairs

Constituents often ask what Congress plans to do about Social Security. It's an issue that comes up at my "town hall" meetings and telephone town halls, and from people who call my office.

They want to know when the money taken from the Social Security Trust Fund is going to be repaid, because retirees expect to benefit from contributions they have made.

On this, there is good news, and then there is bad news. Let's start with the bad. Washington can't ever hope to repay the IOU's because they spent every last borrowed dollar over the last few decades. Plus, they borrowed trillions more from other sources to pay for an ever-growing government.

But there is some good news – if you can call it that. Washington will never again be able to raid Social Security. According to the independent Congressional Budget Office, Social Security is now in a state of perpetual deficits, as more money will go out than comes in. In the next 10 years, annual Social Security deficits will range between \$28 billion and \$120 billion. And over the next 75 years, Social Security has a projected \$5.4 trillion unfunded liability.



U.S. Rep. Tim Huelskamp

● Capitol Notes

Baby Boomers are now beginning to retire, and that puts tremendous pressure on the system. There are 3.3 workers for each beneficiary today, compared to 42 when Social Security was established in 1935. But, down the road, Generations X and Y may not even have access to full benefits. In 2030, there will be 2.2 workers for each recipient.

At least they are being warned: Social Security statements now contain notices informing taxpayers that the system may be completely exhausted in 2037. At that time, a 22 percent across-the-board benefit cut or 31 percent payroll tax increase would be the prescription – if we waited until then for action.

Younger workers are paying for the benefits of today's recipients. That will likely continue in order to fulfill promises to current and near-

retirees. But it is unfair and misleading to suggest that their contributions will be available to them when they retire. Failing to act increases the odds that today's young workers will have limited access to Social Security.

While one reason to update Social Security is to make sure that we fulfill the mission of retirement security. The other reason is larger: the country's burgeoning debt.

If \$14.3 trillion in national debt seems daunting now, it is minuscule compared to what we face if we do not modernize Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid and instead try to operate in the same way we are today. In only a matter of years, without changes, these three programs will consume the entire federal budget. We would further indebt America to China and other foreign governments.

It may not be the most politically expedient decision to begin the discussion of saving and strengthening Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare, but the longer we put it off, the worse it becomes. The solution is not ignoring the problem, but addressing it.

Tim Huelskamp is the congressman from Kansas' 1st District, serving his first term.

Retirement system needs a fix

The Senate approved 35 to 4 on March 23, Senate Substitute for HB 2194, a first step in addressing the nearly \$8 billion unfunded liability to our Kansas Public Employees Retirement System.

None of the increased contributions by either the employee or employer will take effect until July 1, 2013. On that day, the statutory cap on the state contribution will increase from 1.1 percent, up from 0.6 of 1 percent. The state's increase totals about \$23 million a year. The cap for local units of government doesn't increase until Jan. 1, 2014.

The employee contributions are increased starting Jan. 1, 2014, by 1 percent with an additional 1 percent increase on Jan. 1, 2015. For Tier 1 employees, this will increase their contribution from 4 percent to 6 percent over a two-year period. For this increase in employee contribution, these employees will receive a benefit formula multiplier increase from 1.75 percent to 1.85 percent for all future years of service.

Tier 2 employees today are contributing 6 percent of their salary. Because they are cur-



Ralph Ostmeyer

● State Senator

rently contributing 6 percent, they are being given a one-time irrevocable option to increase their contribution rate. If Tier 2 employees choose to stay at their current 6 percent rate, they lose their cost of living adjustment when they retire and their multiplier will stay at the current 1.75 percent. If they elect to increase their contribution to 8 percent over two years, they will retain the cost of living adjustment and receive the increased multiplier to 1.85 percent.

The Senate bill also creates a study commission of 11 members who will analyze the current system and develop a viable plan to ensure long-term sustainability. They will be asked to consider all possibilities, including

a defined-contribution plan, a hybrid of some sort or a modified defined-benefit plan.

The commission must have a report for the Legislature to consider by Dec. 15. The Legislature must act on the recommendations within 180 days. The provisions of this bill do not take effect until the Legislature acts on the study commission's recommendations.

With these proposed changes, the system would reach actuarial equilibrium for the local government employees in 2015, state employees in 2016 and school district employees in 2021.

I'm not sure how the House of Representatives will handle this. They have a different plan.

I can be reached by writing to Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer, State Capitol, 300 SW 10th Street, Room 225-E, Topeka, Kan., 66612, or call (785) 296-7399. My e-mail address is Ralph.Ostmeyer@senate.ks.gov. Let me know if you would like to be on my mailing list.

Colon health means taking charge

To the Editor:

We are writing to invite the public to join in the fight against colon cancer. Many of us know of someone close who has had or died from this disease. Each year in Kansas, about 1,440 people are diagnosed with colorectal cancer and over 500 die of the disease.

Colon cancer is the second-leading cancer killer in Kansas. When this cancer is found early, treatment is very effective. And colon cancer is unique: it can be eliminated if detected early, before cancerous polyps have a chance to grow and spread.

Men and women 50 to 75 or who have a family history of the disease should be screened. Recommended screening tests include the



Free Press Letter Drop

● Our readers sound off

Fecal Occult Blood test every two years, and sigmoidoscopy and colonoscopy every 10. Screening is covered by Medicare and most insurance plans. We would encourage everyone over 50 to discuss this with your medical provider.

March has been Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month, and during this month and on into April and May, the Thomas County Health Department will be offering the Fecal Occult Blood Tests at the minimal cost of \$2.

Please participate and do your part in helping to wipe out this disease!

Kathy Ryan, registered nurse
Amy Knipp, registered nurse
Thomas County Health Department



Mallard Fillmore

● Bruce Tinsley

