

Other Viewpoints

Majority advantage affects redistricting

At a recent hearing about congressional redistricting in Kansas, House Speaker Mike O'Neal dismissed the concerns of Senate Minority Leader Anthony Hensley about districts being redrawn to benefit Republicans as a "conspiracy theory."

Let's be honest. The idea that whatever party is in control of the redistricting process is going to "conspire" to redraw districts to their party's advantage isn't a theory; it's a simple fact. It's just how the system works.

Sen. Tim Owens, an Overland Park Republican and chairman of the Senate redistricting committee, amplified O'Neal's point by saying he had no intention of gerrymandering districts to benefit one party in the next elections. Gerrymandering, in its most extreme form, creates oddly shaped districts, sometimes with narrow tentacles reaching out to pick up voters in the majority party. That may not occur this year in Kansas, but that doesn't mean district lines won't be shifted in ways that reduce the influence of voters in the minority party.

It's just the way the process works. This year — and most years in Kansas — the Republicans are in the majority in the state Legislature and, therefore, in the driver's seat when it comes to redrawing congressional and legislative districts. Although it rarely happens in Kansas, if Democrats were in control, they would do the same thing.

That's why it seems a bit disingenuous to maintain, as O'Neal did, that, "It's all about the maps that make sense and do not overtly politicize the situation." Sure, the maps have to equalize population among the districts and, in Kansas, they don't usually need to involve unusual shapes. The process may not be "overtly" political, but it's hard to deny that splitting Douglas County, one of the most Democratic counties in the state, between two congressional districts could help Republicans hold onto seats in those districts.

Based on new U.S. Census figures, the 3rd District, which includes Johnson County, Wyandotte County and part of Douglas County, will have to be reduced this year. If all of Douglas County moves into the 2nd District, there might be enough Democrats in Douglas and Shawnee counties to influence an election. Another idea Hensley said had been floated — the one that drew O'Neal's "conspiracy theory" label — was to find a way to put Wyandotte County in the 1st District, put all of Douglas County in the 3rd and keep Shawnee in the 2nd, thereby preventing the formation of a significant Democratic voting block in any district.

Whether it's "overt" or not, there's no denying the politicized nature of this process. The only way to reduce or eliminate the political influence in redistricting is to take it out of the hands of partisan legislators and into the hands of a non-partisan independent commission. A few other states have done it. Kansas has tried to do it a couple of times, but — not surprisingly — members of the majority party in the Legislature didn't move the proposals forward.

Probably the only way such a plan ever would gain traction in the state would be through a groundswell of support from the Kansas electorate that forces legislators to let go of this political perk. It's too late for this decade, but there's always 2021.

— Lawrence Journal-World, via the Associated Press

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Tax reform is about job creation

Other Opinions

• Dave Trabert
Kansas Policy Inst.

A recent McClatchy Newspaper editorial ("In the Holy Kansas Empire, only taxes matter") on Gov. Brownback's goal of eliminating the individual income tax perfectly highlighted the greatest impediment to economic recovery in Kansas. Instead of thoughtfully and civilly examining the proposal, the author used superficial data and mockery to reject it.

The first step of problem resolution is acknowledging its magnitude, and Kansas is facing an employment problem of epic proportions. In the last recession, it took 32 months for private sector employment to hit bottom; we lost 46,200 jobs and it took almost six years to return to the previous peak. This time, we lost 90,400 jobs over 34 months and recovery will be much slower without dramatic action.

We're already falling behind. Kansas is the only state whose average annual private sector employment is below its 2010 average. Part of the reason is that, unlike most states, Kansas chose to continue raising taxes last year. Kansas Legislative Research says state and local taxes grew at nearly twice the rate of inflation between 2000 and 2010, with the full impact of the sales tax increase not yet realized.

Jobs and taxpayers have been migrating from high-burden states to low-burden states for some time. Between 1998 and 2010, private sector jobs in the ten states with the high-

est state and local tax burden increased by 1.0 percent, whereas the ten lowest burden states grew by 8.8 percent. At the same time, Kansas lost 1.2 percent. Not surprisingly, the nine states with no personal income tax did even better; they added 1.7 million jobs while the rest of the country lost 300,000. We must reduce our tax burden to create jobs and economic growth, and gradually eliminating the state income tax will have the greatest impact.

But that would not cause crippling reductions in essential services. Letting taxpayers keep more of their income will increase sales tax receipts, as much more money will be spent on taxable goods. That's exactly what Oklahoma experienced when they reduced their income tax rate; Gov. Fallon is working to eliminate their income tax, and Missouri is considering the same. Imagine the impact if one or two of our neighbors did so while Kan-

sas is still keeping taxes high. Eliminating some sales tax exemptions would also partially offset income tax revenue and there is opportunity to reduce spending by making government operate more efficiently.

Questions about the transition are understandable but it's pretty clear that not having an income tax hasn't prevented states from funding services. In fact, General Fund spending in the nine no-income-tax states increased 54 percent between 2000 and 2008 while other states rose 46 percent. Per-pupil spending increases on education between 1998 and 2008 ranged from 50 percent to 123 percent. Not having an income tax didn't prevent those states from spending; if anything, their economic growth made it easier.

Eliminating the income tax is about job creation and economic growth. Continuing our tax-and-spend ways of the past will only make it easier for other states to pick off more Kansas jobs and make a challenging situation far worse.

Dave Trabert is President of Kansas Policy Institute. He is a speaker and also does research and writes on fiscal policy and education issues. He graduated from West Liberty State College with a degree in business administration.

No-till mimics Mother Nature

It's all about using the soil while saving it at the same time on the Lloyd Farms in southwestern Clay County. The Lloyds are doing so with no-till farming practices, crop rotation and cover crops.

No-tillage or zero tillage is a farming system in which the seeds are directly deposited into untilled soil which has retained the previous crop residues.

"You don't turn the soil or disturb the soil," says Steve Swaffar, director of Kansas Farm Bureau Natural Resources who helped organize the farm tour. "The only thing you do to the soil is insert the seed when you plant the crop in the ground."

More than 80 interested folks visited the farm Tuesday while stepping into crops of corn, milo and soybeans — all no-till. This year marked the ninth year Kansas Farm Bureau has sponsored no-till workshops across Kansas.

Thirty-eight year old Josh Lloyd conducted the tour and presented the reasons he's a staunch disciple of no-till farming. He believes he is protecting the valuable resource that has been entrusted to him to grow crops. He understands that without keeping residue in place, wind and rain move soil from his land and into this state and country's water, compromising the water quality and silting in our reservoirs. (Residues are materials left in an agricultural field after the crop has been harvested. These residues include stalks and stubble, stems, leaves and seed pods.)

What drives Lloyd is the continual pursuit of excellence and finding the best way to farm. He's not interested in status quo.

"I'm always looking for a truly better way and soil science is very clear that tillage destroys soil productivity," Lloyd says. "So why would I want to do that?"

Here's what he's talking about. When you till the soil it temporarily breaks the soil loose and the residue on top is destroyed. This is the same residue that protects that precious soil



John Schlageck

• Insights
Kansas Farm Bureau

and keeps it in place in the fields where it remains productive and can grow crops. Keeping the residue in place also restores the precious and most productive layers of topsoil.

The Clay County farmer insists no-till is not easy. Lloyd struggles with it all the time, but that's what makes him tick. He loves the challenge.

"It'd be easy to just sit in the tractor and till the soil the way we used to," Lloyd says. "Too many people let something difficult or failure to succeed right away detour them from their ultimate goal."

Digging a bit deeper into the reason for his no-till fervor, Lloyd says all one has to do is look around at the native environment.

"You don't see any tillage, you don't see terraces and you don't see erosion," he emphasizes. "What you see is Mother Nature always trying to grow something and different things."

Another example Lloyd uses are the Flint Hills. Those hills began as rock. It took thousands of years and living and dying of different plants and the gradual buildup of nutrients and other materials to create the fertile soil that today produces some of the best grass in the world, he says.

Yet one more example he suggested to the visitors on his Clay County farm are the fields that were put back to grass in the '40s, during the soil bank era and later in the '70s when the Conservation Reserve Program was implemented.

"This land was extremely eroded and dam-

aged by the dust-bowl era and drought in the '50s," Lloyd says. "Just by planting grass — a natural cover crop — some of these grasslands have increased their organic matter."

Lloyd tries to put that same concept into practice on his farm. That's what he attempted to demonstrate with the soil pits in his milo and corn fields.

He grows mainly dryland wheat, milo and soybeans on the family farm. He has been planting some corn and sunflowers. He mimics Mother Nature by planting cover crops in his no-till fields between harvesting so the soil is never really void of plant material. These cover crops include canola, peas, radishes and turnips.

Cover crops provide a natural canopy which helps keep weeds out of his fields while holding the soil together and in place on the field with little or no erosion. Without the crops the residue from no-till tends to bunch up with moving water and can break across terraces and create a mess, Lloyd says.

Lloyd has been in the business of no-till farming since 1998 when he returned to the farm after his father asked him if he was interested in coming back and helping.

Since that time he says he's learned something every day. And today, there's no place he'd rather be.

"We're making progress with our no-till practices," Lloyd says. "Sure, we've suffered some setbacks. Everybody does. But we're also taking steps forward. I'm certain we're headed in the right direction."

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.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

