



Other Viewpoints

Tax overhaul raises questions of bias

Gov. Sam Brownback has set a bold agenda for the current legislative session including a major overhaul of the state’s income tax system.

While the plan he has put on the table may have some merit, the disproportionate burden it places on low-income Kansans raises questions that demand the close attention of legislators.

The governor’s plan is good news for most higher-income taxpayers, especially for small business owners, but it holds bad news for Kansans at the low end of the income spectrum. Figures compiled by the Kansas Department of Revenue estimate the amount of income tax paid by residents overall would decrease by about 12 percent under Brownback’s plan. However, the way that saving is distributed is cause for concern.

The Revenue Department figures show the 564,328 Kansas tax filers with adjusted gross incomes of \$25,000 or less received a total refund of \$1.7 million in the 2009 tax year. Under the Brownback plan, that same group would owe a total of \$86.5 million, an average of \$156 per filer. At the same time, the 21,158 Kansans with incomes of \$250,000 or more would pay an average of \$5,239 per person less under the plan.

The governor’s plan also eliminates a number of deductions that would have a significant impact on low-income taxpayers. Key among those is the Earned Income Tax Credit, which benefits about 255,000 low-income workers, by helping them keep more of what they earn. The plan does away with deductions for mortgage interest and child care, which will have a significant impact on families with low or moderate incomes. The governor also is proposing that the state sales tax, scheduled to drop to 5.7 percent in 2013, be maintained at its current 6.3 percent. Sales tax is a particularly regressive tax, especially when applied to the sale of groceries, as it is in Kansas.

Also eliminated in the governor’s plan is the income tax deduction for charitable contributions, which likely would suppress donations to the very nonprofit organizations that could help low-income Kansans. However, Revenue Secretary Nick Jordan and economist Arthur Laffer, who acted as a consultant on the Brownback tax plan, told legislators last week that money saved by eliminating tax deductions would be plowed back into social service programs to help needy families.

Making low-income people pay more taxes so more money is available to fund programs for needy Kansans is a questionable strategy. Traditional conservatives would say people know better than the government how to spend their money and could do so without adding the administrative costs of a government program to redistribute the funds. Is that the best justification the Brownback administration can offer for a plan that places additional tax burdens on low-income Kansans?

Laffer, considered the father of supply-side economics, maintains that the tax plan will pay off in the long run for low-income Kansans because it will lure business to the state and create jobs. That is a desirable goal, but Laffer’s economic theory is controversial and, some economists say, unsound.

Given today’s economic climate, the governor and state legislators face a challenge in how to update and improve the state’s income tax laws for the benefit of all. Most states are facing a similar challenge. Kansas lawmakers must give their best effort to devising a tax plan that is fair and balanced for taxpayers. It’s time for a genuine nonpartisan study of the state’s income tax laws, not finger-pointing and posturing.

– The Lawrence Journal-World, via the Associated Press

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Eye problems lead to weight loss?

Funny, what we depend on to get us through each day, and what we do, but shouldn’t, to satisfy our quest for food.

For me, getting through each day means use of a cane and a magnifying glass. Boy, I’d be lost without them.

A portion of my right eye went on the fritz a few years ago, and in the process, I lost a lot of vision. So, when reading newspapers or magazines, or letters or greeting cards, that glass comes in awfully handy.

Even when writing brief notes to family and friends, the magnifying glass sort of keeps me on the “highway of penmanship” so I don’t wander off into the ditch, which I still sometimes do. The cane keeps me balanced, thanks to neuropathy of both feet and legs.

Twenty months ago, I weighed slightly more than 190 pounds (I am 5 foot, 8 inches). When the doctor’s office weighed me on Jan. 16, I was at 155! Thus, I have a lot of clothes hanging in my closet that I don’t think I’ll ever wear again. For laughs, however, I slipped into several pair of dress pants and couldn’t believe my eyes! Even my sports jackets and suit coats no longer qualify as choice items.

The weight loss for this “Man of the Plains” started 20 months ago with the move to Colorado. It really wasn’t planned; it just happened. The main thing was not to stop for a hamburger and fries for lunch or dinner three or more times a week, and for an egg and sausage McMuffin and hash browns a couple of mornings each week for breakfast.

And because I sold my pickup when I moved out here due to vision problems, I depend on my kids to get me around, and that doesn’t include stops at hamburger houses. That’s what I meant when I said my diet just happened.



Tom Dreiling

• Man of the Plains

When I finally got around to believing that my weight gain started at the burger and fries places, I also concluded that it wasn’t their fault that I couldn’t practice a more responsible eating habit. They didn’t rope me in when I drove by; I freely pulled in on my own. Fingers should be pointed at people like me, and parents too, who irresponsibly patronize those restaurants with their kids.

I need to credit my kids for not stopping each time we pass a McDonald’s or other like hamburger house. They did me a healthy favor.

But the question now surfaces: did I perhaps shed too many pounds? Some family members think so. I am assessing that situation and will adjust as necessary.

I might add that when I received my discharge from the U.S. Air Force on Jan. 31, 1963 – four years active duty, four on standby status – I weighed 158 pounds. So, here I am 49 years later at 155. (I must confess that at one time, I weighed 219. But that is a story for another column.)

In a nutshell, if you are serious about losing weight – if you are a lover of fries and hamburgers – might I make this suggestion: drive by, not in, just because you are in the neighborhood.

Speaking of weight, former House Speaker

and presidential hopeful Newt Gingrich comes awfully close to the obesity classification. Looking at him, I often wonder when during the day he doesn’t eat.

Snippets

“Note to Tebow: The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away – seemingly in an arbitrary and capricious fashion. So why bother to pray after scoring; he’s going to do what he wants anyhow.”

“Unfortunately, Tim Tebow has replaced the Rocky Mountains as the state’s top attraction....”

“No matter what, John Elway will always be the hero of Denver Broncos football!”

“... Mr. Romney’s problem is he talks too fast and his words get lost in his mouth....”

“Gingrich would give Prez Obama the toughest debate challenge....”

“...Look at the four finalists. The Republicans again aren’t very serious about winning the presidency.”

“The Texas gunslinger sure didn’t last very long. Boy, talk about a cocky dude! ...”

“Guess who will be showing up in the unemployment line in the fall? Hint, middle name Hussein....”

“...They say there is an outside chance the Democrats will regain control of the House in the November election. Pelosi again? Heaven forbid! ...”

Tom Dreiling of Denver is a former publisher of the Colby Free Press and The Norton Telegram, and a former long-time editor of the old Goodland Daily News. He is a life-long Democrat, a curmudgeon come lately and a newly minted Coloradan.

Wonder, worry mark hopes for crops

A recent swing through northwestern Kansas reveals a winter wheat crop that looks really good. Stands are uniform, the color is a dark green and even with the mild temperatures so far this winter, most of the wheat has not grown too quickly and may escape the specter of winter kill.

Even in southwestern Kansas, that region of the state hit the hardest last year, the wheat crop looks good. Favorable growing conditions began the end of September and early October when this year’s crop was being planted.

Rains from three to six inches were reported in much of southwestern Kansas, although some of the cropland near Elkhart, Sublette, Satanta and Meade didn’t receive plentiful rainfall.

A similar weather pattern swept through this part of the state a week before Christmas. More than a foot of snow blanketed a large area of southwestern Kansas from northern Morton County north to Syracuse and east all the way to Ellis County where 14 inches was reported at Victoria.

Scott City recorded 15 inches of snow and moisture totaled six inches or more from the rain and snow that stayed on the ground throughout half of January.

Wheat growers remain optimistic this year’s wheat crop is far better off than one year ago. The significant rainfall and snow will go a long way in helping this year’s crop enter the spring growing season with a leg up.

Most long-term forecasts predict normal precipitation throughout the upcoming spring



John Schlageck

• Insights

Kansas Farm Bureau

season with another dry summer. Should this hold true, this year’s wheat crop will at least have a better chance than last year of being harvested. With a few timely rains in February and March there may be far fewer acres abandoned if any.

Many southwestern Kansas producers consider the current condition of their wheat crop ideal at this time. Because of the month-long snow cover, most of the crop hasn’t broken dormancy yet. Temperatures have been cooler than in other regions of Kansas where record high winter temperatures have been reported.

Less growth than normal means healthier wheat at this time. There’s less chance the crop will green up, grow and then face the possibility of being hammered by freeze this spring when it begins to warm up.

Drive through southwestern Kansas and one thing becomes apparent quickly and that’s the amount of wheat in the fields. This year’s acreage is tabbed at 9.5 million acres up from 8.7 million in 2011.

As already stated, planting conditions overall were much better this year than last. High wheat prices have also driven this increase, but

continued dryness in some areas of the central and southern Plains also led to more wheat planted. Compared to more thirsty crops like corn, milo and soybeans, wheat tends to survive drought while producing a decent crop.

Subsoil moisture remains a concern for every farmer throughout much of western Kansas. Shortfalls vary from almost no subsoil moisture in the south-western counties to several inches in some of the northern tier Kansas counties.

Yes, it’s a new year and with it comes new hope of harvest in June. While all farmers know that’s a lifetime away, as eternal optimists they’ll hope and pray for moisture, better-than-average growing conditions and storms that stay away from their land. And once they harvest the wheat, they begin wondering, worrying and wishing for a successful fall harvest.

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.

Write us

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Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

