



Free Press Viewpoint

Conservative battle starting to heat up

The gridlock that enveloped Topeka at the end of the legislative session is just one outcropping of a battle being fought around the country as emergent conservative forces flex their muscles at the statehouse and within the GOP.

As we've found in Kansas, this process isn't always pretty and it's not always constructive.

Across the country, results have been mixed, the Associated Press reports. In Nebraska, Gov. Dave Heineman called an angry press conference to announce several vetoes after the Legislature gutted his tax plan.

In Missouri, newly-dominant Republicans fought over spending and over the definition of a true Republican. In Oklahoma, Gov. Mary Fallin saw her plan to cut income taxes defeated.

Here in Kansas, Gov. Sam Brownback's tax-cut plans stalled in the more liberal Senate. After negotiations ground to a halt, somehow the Senate voted to pass a House-backed plan that even the governor thought was too much. It included most of his cuts, but few of the "adjustments" he proposed to even out revenue.

As a result, the state faces either big budget cuts on top of years of budget cuts, or the House and Senate will have to change the plan next year.

In Wisconsin, meanwhile, Republican Gov. Scott Walker survived a union-backed recall vote which left control of the state Senate in doubt. The bitter fight pitted neighbor against neighbor and friend against friend.

A common thread in all these states is a push by conservatives for lower taxes, lower spending, a more pro-business attitude and more attention to social issues such as abortion.

Beyond that, though, is a nationwide drive to elect even more conservatives, a drive which sometimes has backed more liberal or "moderate" Republicans into a corner. With heavy hitters arrayed to eliminate them, they have little to lose and no choice but to stand and fight.

That happened in Kansas, where moderate senators who have controlled the upper chamber suddenly faced primary challenges by popular incumbent House members with promises of financial backing from the state Chamber of Commerce's political arm, among other sources.

Some claim national conservative groups, backed by the billionaire Koch brothers of Wichita, are out to take over state Legislatures for the conservative cause.

The impact of that initiative remains to be seen. By forcing the federal courts to draw district maps for the Legislature and Congress, however, the conservatives may have shot themselves in the foot. Some observers say they, not the moderates, will come out as the big losers.

This fight is not just in Kansas, and it's not going away. Everyone, conservative, moderate or liberal, has the right to state their case and run for office, of course. Voters may find some of the tactics offensive, though.

In the end, they'll decide who they want running the states, not the money guys or the national groups. And that may surprise a few people. — Steve Haynes

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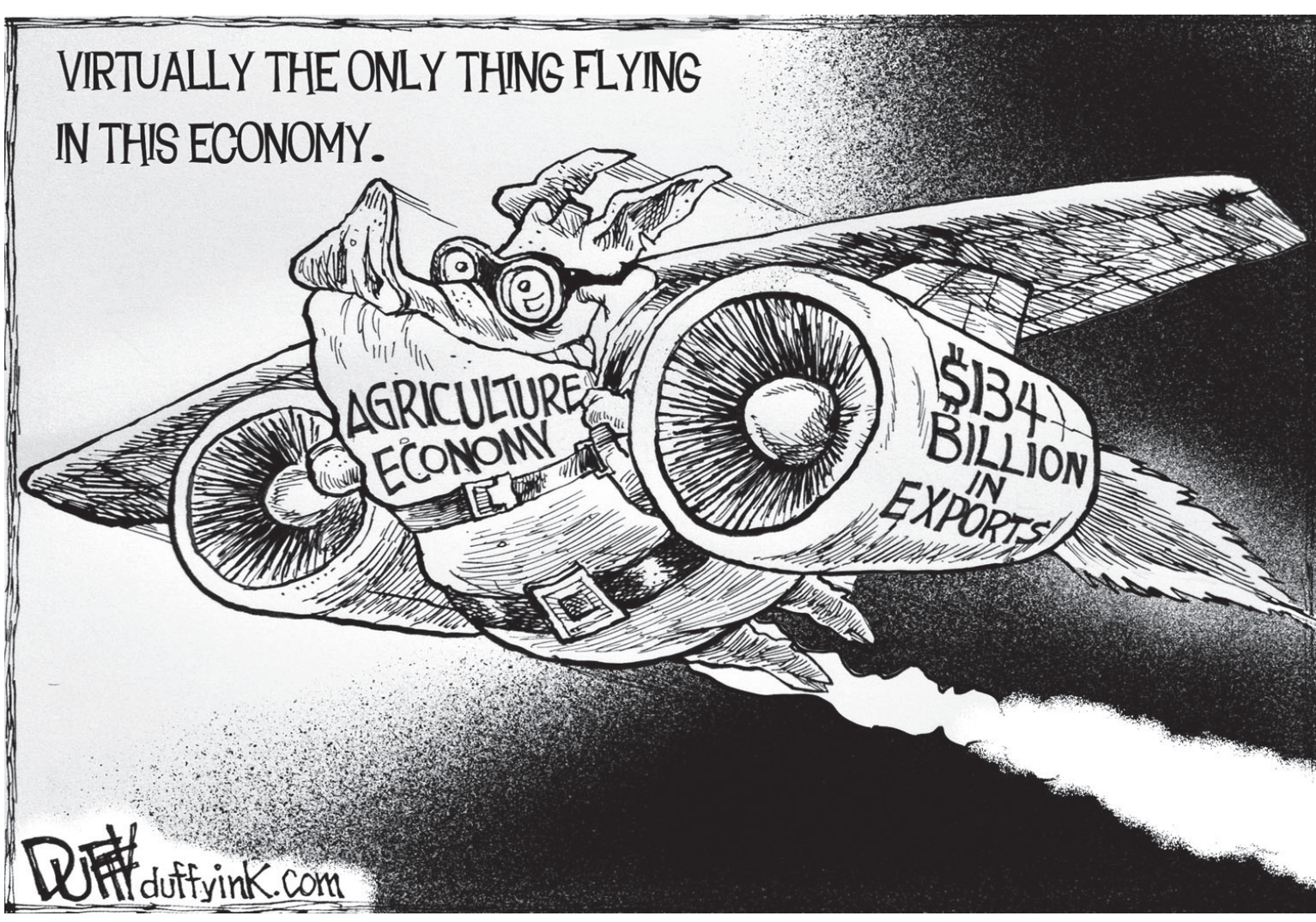
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2012 Legislature full of difficult issues

After 16 weeks in Topeka, one of the longest sessions on record, the 2012 Legislature has finally adjourned. I'm thrilled to be back home with my family, friends and neighbors in the 121st District.

No one ever leaves Topeka completely satisfied, especially since this session was packed with difficult agenda items. However, I'm pleased with the hard work put forward by the House and believe our actions provide our constituents with the policies they've demanded and the government they deserve.

The following is a brief summary of some of the major topics considered this year. With the 2012 session now behind us, I look forward to making my way throughout the district to talk to you directly about these issues. I do my best to attend as many forums and discussions as possible, so if you have the opportunity, join me. If you would simply rather chat about the issues individually, please contact me so we can arrange a time to visit.

Redistricting Kansas: The only tasks required of the Legislature are to produce a budget and, every 10 years, to draw boundaries for the state's legislative, congressional and state Board of Education districts. The House worked diligently to pass maps as early as February. Unfortunately, our colleagues in the Senate failed to make the same sensible choices, forcing the session into overtime.

Throughout the session, redistricting brought unprecedented situations to the Statehouse. In March, the Senate rejected tradition by killing a House-drawn House district map. Later, the Senate maps failed to get a majority vote in the House based, primarily, on legality concerns.

The most remarkable situation came when several senators came to the House to offer their help because it would be difficult, at best, for their chamber to produce maps for further consideration. As a result, the House passed a third option for the House, Senate and Board of Education. All were variations to maps already considered by the Senate. Unfortunately, the Senate did not consider these options.

Throughout the redistricting process, the House was careful to avoid division and focused on passing responsible maps. In fact, the House district map passed with a bi-partisan 109 votes. The Senate was given ample opportunity to do the same but failed. Unfortunately, this means the federal courts drew the new district maps. We owed it to the people of Kansas to pass maps. It is our duty, not the courts.

Tax Cuts For All Kansans: One of the most pressing issues facing the Legislature has been creating jobs and strengthening the economy. In 2011 and 2012, the House has passed laws aimed at reducing the tax burden on Kansans, currently the second-highest in the region.

This session, an agreement was reached on tax legislation but the Senate became reluctant to pass the compromise. Unwilling to let another year go by without substantive tax reform, the House passed alternative legislation, originally passed by the Senate, to ensure taxes would be cut for all Kansas residents.

I could not vote for this tax bill. There were several good provisions, but it contained several business-tax policies I could not support. I feel the best tax policy is one that broadens our tax base and reduces taxes for all Kansans. In addition, I believe the Legislature should put a higher priority on reducing Kansas property taxes and paying off the state debt.

HB 2117, which passed, does not represent this tax philosophy. Instead it deletes taxes



Rick Billinger

• This week in Topeka

for nonwage income for limited-liability and "subchapter S" corporations. In my view this would not stimulate the economy but rather give a select few tax cuts.

The compromise bill I supported would have cut rates for all those with a job and been a stimulus to businesses to help those who are unemployed get a job. Unfortunately, the Senate would not come to the table to reach a compromise. This is frustrating, yet not a surprise, as this has been their standard conduct throughout the session. It is shameful that because of this we could not move forward on a reasonable tax compromise.

Kansas Public Employee Retirement System: One of the more critical issues we face this session is the chronically underfunded public employee retirement system. The economy hit pension programs nationwide hard in recent years; in Kansas, it has compounded the structural deficiencies within our own system. Unless substantive reform measures are taken to improve the stability of the pension fund, the issues will only worsen.

Late in the veto session, an agreement was reached on reforming the state's retirement system. The agreement is based on a cash-balance plan that creates a third tier for state employees beginning Jan. 1, 2015. In addition, the state's required contribution is increased under the agreement until the actuarially required contribution is achieved. All employees who participate in the system will receive quarterly statements on their retirement benefits. Under the current plan, members get annual statements.

For 17 years, the state made payments into the system that met the legal requirement to fund the pension program but failed to meet its requirement to pay the actuarial required contribution. This resulted in an unfunded liability of \$8 billion at the start of 2011. It was an absolute necessity for the Legislature to agree on legislation to address the unfunded liability and ensure the system's longevity. The cash balance plan included in the agreement will stop the unfunded-liability bleeding while giving the state an affordable plan that benefits our hard-working employees.

Water Policy: Kansas water policy, an important issue for people in western Kansas, was one of the first issues settled during the session. The Ogallala Aquifer is the primary source of water in the western third of Kansas. Counties located above the aquifer account for approximately two-thirds of the state's agricultural economy. The need to preserve the aquifer is key to the economic future of western Kansas and the state. Each of these policies will help establish a foundation of good stewardship and prolong the lifespan of this precious resource.

• HB 2451. Removing "Use It or Lose It" Water Policies: Removes the current "use it or lose it" policy that forces water allocation rights to be used or else be taken away.

• SB 272. Multi-Year Flex Accounts: Allows for multi-year flex accounts to assist affected parties in times of drought. This would give

parties flexibility in using their water allocation over a five-year period.

• SB 310. Local Enhanced Management Areas: Establishes an option for local citizens to put forward proactive conservation plans in times of water shortages. It provides the affected parties the opportunity to decide how to address the shortage and avoid the political process involved with the current process.

• HB 2516. Water Bank Extension and Permanency: Extends the availability and permanency of the Water Bank Act. A person with water rights can deposit a portion of their usage rights into the water bank for purchase. The potential for fracking in Kansas makes this a useful tool in ensuring oil producers have the water they need for the fracking procedures.

Budget: The House has worked all session to find the right mix for a responsible, equitable budget for fiscal year 2013, which begins July 1. This is one of the better budgets I have had the opportunity to vote for because it will make strides in reducing spending, holding a responsible ending balance to protect against further economic uncertainty or loss of federal funds and support Kansans during various disasters. There were many difficult decisions made in drafting this bill, along with hundreds of man hours. This budget cuts almost \$51 million from the governor's recommendation and reduces overall spending by almost \$600 million from 2012.

The House position also goes further by reducing authorized state full-time employees by 320 positions. Some of these were due to early retirements and others were because of the elimination of noncritical programs. This budget will continue to further establish getting the state on strong fiscal footing in order to respond to the financial challenges ahead of us.

The House was also able to include some much-needed relief to school districts by boosting base state aid per pupil with \$50 million. In another effort to further reduce the state's waiting list for services to the physically and developmentally disabled, we were able to include \$5.8 million in state spending which will match another \$6.5 million in federal funds. This effort will reduce a trend started in the Sebelius administration to allow waiting lists to develop.

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. He may be reached at 310 Acacia Drive, Goodland, Kan., 67735. Call him at (785) 899-5274.

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Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

