Other Viewpoints

Weight loss goals will lighten us up

Gov. Sam Brownback has launched a Governor's Weight Loss Challenge to encourage Kansans to get healthier and work together to reduce the state's obesity rate.

It is a laudable goal and it's significant that Brownback has stepped to the forefront and plans to participate by leading a five-member team in the challenge. Obesity is a major health concern in Kansas and across the United States – reports indicate more than two-thirds of adults and almost one-third of children are overweight or obese – and all efforts to draw attention to the problem and address it with action are welcomed.

The Governor's Weight Loss Challenge is scheduled to run from Jan. 15 through May 15, during which five-member teams of state employees will compete to lose the most percentage weight, which, hopefully, the participants will keep off.

A similar program conducted in Topeka this year – Get Fit Topeka Style – challenged 20 participants to lose weight. At the end of the program, a six-month challenge sponsored by Jayhawk Pharmacy and Patient Supply, the competitors had shed a total of 604 pounds with the assistance of trainers, dietitians and monitoring by medical professionals.

Members of the group were evaluated by percent of weight lost, percent of inches lost, and improvement in cholesterol, lipids, blood sugar readings, blood pressure and discontinuation of medications related to obesity. Winners were named in the categories of top female contestant, top male contestant and top team.

Get Fit Topeka Style was touted as an inaugural event, and it's hoped it will be continued. All who participated – contestants, trainers, dietitians, medical staff and sponsors – deserve credit for showing Topekans what can be accomplished in a relatively short period of time to improve their health and fitness.

While the governor's primary challenge is to state employees, Brownback is encouraging teams of people who don't work for the state to participate.

A website, at www.weightloss.ks.gov, is available to track the progress of each team in the competition. The website is available to nonstate groups who want to take up the challenge, although they won't be eligible for prizes. Teams can begin registering Dec. 17 on the website.

Brownback has promised prizes to the top two teams of state employees who lose the greatest total percentage of weight over the four-month challenge. Other teams of state employees who beat the governor's team will be entered in a drawing to win prizes.

Just how difficult it will be to beat Brownback's team is unknown. He says he will announce the other members of his team in December. If they all are as fit as the governor appears to be, the team might not have a lot of weight to shed.

Regardless, the challenge is an excellent way to encourage Kansans to focus on their health.

– The Topeka Capital-Journal, via the Associated Press

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President should oppose program cuts

Andy Heintz
• Wildcat Ramblings

How President Barack Obama's administration handles the so-called fiscal cliff will provide Americans with a window into how the president plans to govern in his second term.

If Obama agrees to make cuts to Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security in exchange for getting enough Republicans to break with tradition and agree to tax increases on the wealthiest Americans, then it will be obvious that he has no plans to shake things up in Washington.

Most Americans, including even conservatives and Tea Party types, oppose cuts in Social Security and Medicare. Furthermore, Americans also have generally supported raising taxes on the wealthiest few. So while the entitlement cuts for tax increases compromise would represent a bipartisan agreement of sorts, it would be a bipartisan agreement between the elites with the rest of America left to watch unhappily from the sidelines.

One strategy aimed at ensuring the solvency of Medicare and Social Security that has received attention in the press is to raise the Social Security retirement age and the age of eligibility for Medicare. Since Americans are living longer than when these programs were signed into law, the reasoning goes, than it makes sense to make the elderly wait a little longer to receive their benefits.

The major flaw in this line of thinking is that while it's true that Americans are living longer, these life expectancy gains have been mostly relegated to affluent and educated Americans. For lower-income Americans, life expectancy hasn't increased all that much. And it makes little sense to punish retired construction workers because doctors are living longer.

While Social Security doesn't pose as big a threat to future budgets as is often advertised, the same can't be said of Medicare. But raising the eligibility age isn't the remedy to what ails this program. The high cost of Medicare – and Social Security and Medicaid for that matter – is directly related to America's costly health-care system.

One way to curb health care costs would be for the government to rethink the way it finances drug research. Today, prescription drug companies are provided a temporary monopoly by the government for bringing new drugs to market. The problem with this patent-monopoly system – aside from restricting important knowledge – is that the companies often charge prices above the cost of production. These high costs are a burden for people of modest income, not to mention people in third world countries – and some people right here in the U.S. – where access to drugs can be a life-or-death issue.

Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel-Prize-winning economist, has proposed an alternative approach. While he doesn't endorse doing away with the patent-drug research altogether, he does support the creation of a medical prize fund where the government would give the biggest prizes to developers of prevention and treatments for the most debilitating diseases.

U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) has proposed setting up such a system to support research on AIDS drugs. The system, endorsed by Stiglitz, would set up a $3 billion-a-year fund to buy out future patents for AIDS drugs. Dean Baker, co-founder of the Center for Economic and Policy Research, wrote in the *Huffington Post* that the companies and researchers would be compensated for their work and the patents then would be placed in the public domain. Then the drugs could be sold as a generic in the free market at a much lower cost, and some generics cost as little as $5 to $7 per prescription.

The cost of health care can be brought down in a morally acceptable and economically feasible way that will prevent deep cuts in popular programs and lead to better health outcomes for millions of people.

Andy Heintz, a K-State journalism graduate and former Colby Free Press *sports editor now living in Ottumwa, Iowa, loves K-State athletics and fishing, sports and opinion writing. You can find his blog at www.orble.com/just-one-mans-vision.*

Wind subsidy is corporate welfare

U.S. Rep. Tim Huelskamp
• Capitol Notes

Democrats call Republicans defenders of big business. Republicans accuse Democrats of meddling in the market at the expense of taxpayers.

Democrats (sometimes accurately) accuse Republican leadership of prioritizing the interests of Corporate America ahead of the average person. Republicans (often rightfully) criticize the Obama administration for expensive "investments" in the private sector that yield negative returns for taxpayers.

But, when it comes to energy subsidies, politicians on both sides of the aisle embrace their characterization of the other: Republicans are willing to distort free markets and Democrats are willing to defend corporations. This is reflected in the bipartisan supporters of extending – once again – the massive taxpayer subsidy for the wind-energy industry.

A one-year extension of this 20-year-old "tax credit" carries a total price tag of $12 billion. According to the industry's own estimates, not extending it for one year will result in 37,000 jobs lost. That amounts to roughly $324,000 in taxpayer subsidy for each job. And this wind subsidy is 86 times greater per unit than subsidies for oil, gas and coal. (I'd like to see those gone, too, by the way).

Budgeting is always about priorities, particularly so when America is already $16 trillion in debt. Are we going to hand out $12 billion – 40 percent of which would be borrowed – on propping up a private industry that should stand on its own after 20 years of massive taxpayer support? Or should we instead use that $12 billion for another year of the school lunch program? Or how about let small businesses and families cough up the $12 billion with the scheduled massive death tax increase next year? (Or, perhaps Washington will instead do what it has done for decades: put it all on the credit card!)

Contrary to the claims made by well-paid lobbyists, this is no infant industry still in incubation. While the subsidy goes to the wind farms that produce the energy, the loudest supporters are the large manufacturers who produce turbines and other related equipment. Siemens, which has threatened to lay off workers in Kansas if the tax subsidy is not extended, is a $100 billion global corporation. General Electric, or GE, another big player in the wind-product business, is even larger. These companies have enormous legal and accounting departments that should be smart enough to know that Washington cannot keep spending and borrowing forever.

Businesses like Siemens and GE get to reap the rewards of success when they make smart decisions. But, they should also suffer the consequences of bad decisions. If this is a profitable industry, then they will find a way to survive without massive taxpayer subsidies. If they cannot, then they and taxpayers should not be in the business. Why should American taxpayers be on the hook for subsidizing these billion-dollar corporations, including one (GE) that paid no taxes on its billions of dollars of profit in 2010?

It certainly is possible to run a profitable energy venture without subsidies. Just this past week, I participated in an oil and gas conference in Hutchinson. The 600 people at the meeting were all looking to create jobs – and none on the backs of taxpayers.

The time to take off the proverbial training wheels is now. When Congress originally created this tax benefit in the 1990s, it was intended to be temporary. Every extension since then was intended to be temporary. Unsurprisingly, this time around, they tell us the same thing: the need is temporary. What evidence is there that the same industry lobbyists will not be back next year asking for just "one more year?"

Republicans and Democrats alike should not be tricked into ignoring the principles for which they typically stand just so big businesses do not have to evaluate and improve their own practices. We need more of all types of market competitive energy, and we cannot afford a massive, market-distorting $12 billion subsidy for an industry that should be profitable by now.

Tim Huelskamp, a Republican from Fowler, and a former state senator, is the congressman for the 1st District of Kansas. He serves on the House Veterans' Affairs committee.

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Mallard Fillmore

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