

Other Viewpoints

Property tax shift to burden families

There seems to be no limit to how hard this Kansas Legislature, under the guiding hand of the Kansas Chamber of Commerce, will work to reduce taxes for large corporate interests, even if it means shifting the state's revenue burden to the average working family.

Among the ongoing tax discussion in Topeka is a bill that would redefine commercial and industrial machinery and equipment in an effort to make such property tax-exempt.

Under the bill, "trade fixtures" and equipment permanently attached to a property would avoid property tax assessment. The Kansas Division of the Budget estimates the bill would reduce the assessed valuation of grain elevators by 25 percent, railroads by 32 percent and some manufacturing and processing facilities by as much as 75 percent. Oil refineries, such as McPherson's National Cooperative Refinery Association facility, would be among the biggest beneficiaries of the bill.

In McPherson County, the bill would strip 24 percent of the county's total assessed valuation; Montgomery County, one of the poorest counties in the state, would lose 54 percent of its entire tax base, largely for the benefit of a single company, CVR Energy, which owns a refinery and nitrogen plant there.

While those companies would save money on their taxes, the burden to support local government and schools once again would be shifted to the average homeowner. In McPherson, residents could see a 9.9-mill increase to make up the difference, and in Montgomery County offsetting the exemption would raise the property tax levy on homeowners by more than 51 mills.

Naturally, the Kansas Chamber of Commerce has its fingerprints all over this legislation and undoubtedly will go on at length about how such legislation would create jobs and increase investment in the state.

But by now, most Kansans should recognize that's an illusion. What this legislation really does is throw average taxpayers under the proverbial bus — taxpayers who without the power of a well-heeled lobby in Topeka have little choice but to pay more of their wealth to support the basic services and functions that benefit both business and people.

Surely someone in this Legislature has the courage to stop the constant assault on middle-class taxpayers. Someone must have the nerve to tell the Kansas Chamber of Commerce that its ideas are bad and that every piece of legislation that saves a corporation money also carries a severe cost for the average Kansas household.

Sadly, that person has yet to emerge, or if he or she has, that voice has been drowned out by the lobbyists in Topeka. As long as the majority remains eager to support any piece of "pro-business" legislation placed on its desks, average Kansans can expect a long, sustained attack on their futures and a tax policy that continues to represent all interests except theirs.

— *The Hutchinson News, via the Associated Press*

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The *Colby Free Press* encourages Letters to the Editor on any topic of general interest. Letters should be brief, clear and to the point. They must be signed and carry the address and phone number of the author.

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Everyone loses in government gridlock

Ah, for those good old days when Uncle Sam lived within his income — and without most of ours.

If memory serves me, our country operated in the black in the '90s with a Democratic president, Bill Clinton. Although the Republicans continued to hold a majority in the House and Senate, the president and Congress were able to compromise on deficit-reduction legislation in 1997.

Economic growth was so robust that the reduction targets were met much sooner than expected. The budget shortfall that stood at \$290 billion in 1992 turned into a surplus of almost \$80 billion in 1999. The stock market remained strong throughout the Clinton presidency, and the unemployment rate dropped to just above 4 percent, which many economists consider full employment.

But that's ancient history. Today, our government is mired in gridlock. Politics is supposed to be the art of compromise. There is none today in Washington.

Economic policies of the past, including funding government, spending cuts and balancing the budget, were all forged through compromise within the legislative and executive branches. This is sorely lacking today at either end of the political spectrum.

Government spending cuts, labeled sequestration, are ready to become the plan of action for 2013. With sequestration, an estimated \$85 billion will be cut from this year's budget and \$1.2 trillion is slated to be cut during the course of a decade.

For the sake of our republic, President



John Schlageck

• Insights

Kansas Farm Bureau

Obama and Congress must work together and carry out their responsibility of running a government that lives within a budget while prioritizing programs that effectively and efficiently serve the American people.

There is no way money coming into the federal treasury can keep up with the money pouring out. We cannot expect the federal budget deficit to decrease until members of Congress and the President make up their minds to reduce spending.

Slowing the growth of government spending will begin to shift control of resources away from politicians and bureaucrats to the people who have earned and saved the money.

We've already passed \$16.4 trillion in debt at the end of 2012. We are mortgaging our children and grandchildren's futures. This spending cannot go on.

Another segment of our economy that remains under the knife with sequestration is the agricultural community and farm programs that help feed us. Cuts in spending must be across the board. Every sector of our economy should shoulder this debt burden and receive less of the budget pie.

Unfortunately, sequestration would cut

funding from farm programs called direct payments. The problem here is that Congress is still trying to write a new farm bill that would likely cut direct payments and use that money to pay for other safety-net and risk-management programs.

If those cuts are made to the farm bill now, Congress will be unable to write a farm bill with an adequate safety net. Farm country is in the throes of a three-year drought with the probability of a fourth year on the way. The crop protection plan has worked well to ensure farmers are protected against such natural disasters.

Take away this protection through cuts in crop insurance and agriculture will be back to asking Congress for disaster assistance each and every year.

In the past, increased government involvement was necessary to meet the needs of its people. Today, government needs to slow down, to be less involved in the lives of its citizens.

Living within our means while cutting back on spending is a step in the right direction; however, we will not see a turnaround overnight. Still, the sooner President Obama and Congress come up with a plan that will reduce federal spending and lower our national debt, the sooner we can move toward better times in this country.

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.

Turnaround busy for committee chair

Turnaround is here. Last Friday was the halfway mark in this year's legislative session, the time when bills must be passed out of their house of origin — or die.

The first two days of the week were filled with long committee meetings, trying to get all the bills worked before the deadlines. The last three days featured extended days of floor debate on all the House bills that had passed out of committees. The bills that pass out of the House last week were sent to the Senate for consideration, and the Senate bills come to the House.

After "turn around," the process begins anew. Many bills that stirred the most controversy will not be discussed again this year. The bills that passed the House or Senate, however, now have more statewide attention because they are still alive. Bills will be assigned to committees; if they pass out of committee, the bills will be worked on the floor. And when a bill is passed by both houses, it still has to be signed by the governor.

I have been asked, "What is the importance of being a chairman?" Bills are assigned to my Education Budget Committee by the speaker of the House. Normally, they are related to education. I have had bills about school transportation, pharmacy loan forgiveness, the school finance formula, military pupil counts and many others. The chairman can decide whether or not the committee will hear a bill. "Hearing a bill" means that the bill will be read in committee and any proponent or opponent may testify for or against it. The testimony has to be written, and copies are provided to each member of the committee.

"Working the bill" is the next step in the



Ward Cassidy

• This Week in Topeka

process. A committee chairman has the right to decide whether or not a bill will be worked. If I decide I want to work a bill, the committee members can comment on their desire to pass it to the floor for a vote of the full House, or to vote it down. Committee members can also make amendments to the bill to make it a stronger piece of legislation. After all committee members have had a chance to fully vet the bill, then I can bring it to a vote. The chairman only votes when there is a tie. My vote is the tiebreaker — yes, the bill goes on, or no, the bill dies.

In Education Budget, we were assigned 17 budgets to "hear" and then to "work." For each budget, there is an agency request and a recommendation from the governor for what he plans to put in his budget. Our committee listens to the agency one day and the next day makes recommendations or amendments. After we pass them out, the budgets go to the full Appropriations Committee.

The most time-consuming and arduous task I have in the Legislature is presenting these budgets to Appropriations. The public schools budget is over \$3 billion, and I am expected to know where all that money goes. I do have the help of a legislative aide who does any research I request and who knows the budget in-

side out. I can refer to her whenever a question comes up that I am unsure of.

Two weeks ago, the six Regents colleges presented their budgets in my committee. It is so interesting to hear these college presidents discuss their budgets and their innovative programs.

Being a committee chair is a lot more work, but it gives me a better opportunity to discuss the issues important to northwest Kansas.

Rep. Ward Cassidy of St. Francis represents the 120th District in the Kansas House of Representatives, covering the northwest part of Thomas County (including Colby), plus Decatur, Rawlins, Cheyenne, Sherman and Wallace counties. This is his second term in the Legislature, and he is chair of the Education Budget Committee and vice chair of the Education Committee. Send e-mails to ward.cassidy@house.ks.gov.

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Mallard Fillmore

- Bruce Tinsley

