

Other Viewpoints

Promises fade with sales tax vote

Cheered on by Gov. Sam Brownback, the 2013 Kansas Senate voted to make liars of the 2010 Legislature and then-Gov. Mark Parkinson by supporting extension of a sales-tax increase scheduled to sunset June 30.

Other proposals would further treat the \$8.2 billion, 10-year transportation plan like money free for the taking, though Brownback once said the state should seek alternatives to massive sweeps of highway funding. Also wobbly are the state's commitments to funding for public schools, higher education, social services, gambling-addiction help, a college-savings matching plan for low-income students and more.

Promises, schmomises. The Statehouse priority this year and for the foreseeable future is paying for last year's rash tax-cut plan. The governor and his allies are seizing any revenue and budget cuts they can find to keep the state moving further down the path toward eliminating the state's income tax while maintaining a 7.5 percent ending balance — come what may for Kansas.

The Brownback-blessed, Senate-passed tax plan would enable the state to collect an extra \$316 million in fiscal 2014, thanks to the continuation of the higher sales-tax rate and a 24 percent cut to income-tax deductions. It's unlikely that the plan will win approval in the House, where many lawmakers oppose turning a temporary sales-tax hike into a permanent one and also favor cutting the budget into balance. A rival proposal offered last week in the House by Rep. Richard Carlson, R-St. Marys, would let the sales-tax rate drop but make further income-tax cuts dependent on revenue growth of more than 2 percent a year — too slowly for many Republicans.

But even if the Senate bill did pass the House, \$50 million or more still would need to be cut from the 2014 budget, according to Senate Majority Leader Terry Bruce, R-Hutchinson.

Of course, before it's all over, even legislators who champion schools and look out for social services funding may favor the higher sales tax rather than see those budget areas further slashed and local governments forced to raise property taxes.

Some of them used the five-hour Senate debate last week to highlight the harm done to poor Kansans by last year's tax plan, which eliminated a food sales-tax rebate that benefited the working poor, a child-care tax credit, the homestead refund for renters and credits targeting the disabled. As it is, only one (Mississippi) of the 14 states that tax food sales does so at a higher rate than Kansas.

"Nobody is going to walk away with everything they want," Bruce said. "But hopefully it's what the state needs right now."

Actually, what the state needs right now are leaders capable of recognizing that last year's tax-cut bill was a mistake — one now being compounded by making low-income Kansans bear a disproportionate share of the cost of fixing it.

— *The Wichita Eagle, via the Associated Press*

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155 W. Fifth St. (USPS 120-920) (785) 462-3963
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Sharon Friedlander - Publisher
friedlander@nwkansans.com

NEWS

Kayla Cornett - Sports Reporter
colby.sports@nwkansans.com

Marian Ballard - Copy Editor
mballard@nwkansans.com

Sam Dieter - News Reporter
colby.editor@nwkansans.com

Heather Alwin - Society Editor
colby.society@nwkansans.com

ADVERTISING

colby.ads@nwkansans.com

Kathryn Ballard - Advertising Representative
kballard@nwkansans.com

Kylee Hunter - Graphic Design
khunter@nwkansans.com

BUSINESS OFFICE

Office Manager

Melissa Edmondson - Office Manager
medmondson@nwkansans.com

Evan Barnum - Systems Administrator
support@nwkansans.com

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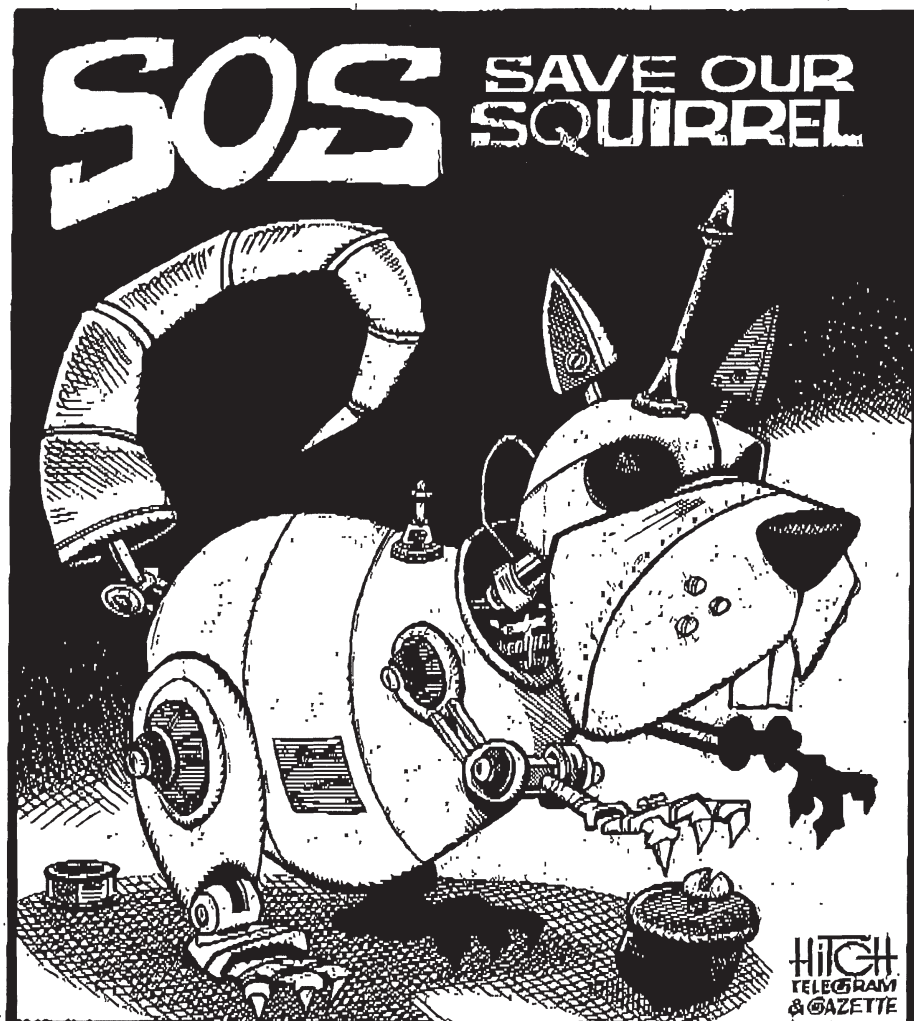
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House tax plan affects transportation

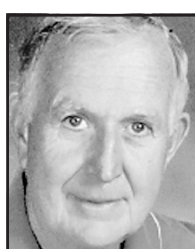
Earlier, I wrote about the proposed tax plans, noting that there would be a House tax plan, a Senate tax plan and the governor's tax plan. A week ago, the House passed its plan out of committee.

Here are some highlights:

Part one allows the rate to go down to 5.7 percent, as provided in current law. That will be a reduction of .6 of 1 percent from the current rate. The .4 percent increase that remains, and was earmarked for the Kansas Department of Transportation, would instead be diverted to the state general fund for the next two fiscal years. It would result in a positive fiscal note to the general fund close to \$400 million over the two years.

This appears to be an additional draw from transportation on top of the diversion funds in the governor's recommended budget. What will be the effect? Will all of the T-Works projects be delayed for two years? Does T-Works continue but statewide road maintenance take a hit? This remains to be discussed.

Part two: Instead of singling out the mortgage interest deduction for elimination, as the governor proposed, the bill would cut all de-



Ward Cassidy

• This week in Topeka

ductions by 24 percent, proportional to the size of the income-tax rate cut on last year's top bracket (4.9/6.45=76 percent). As income tax rates are decreased in the future, the cut would also be adjusted. Projection — from 2014 to 2018 would see an additional \$4.5 million cut. The cut applies only to itemized deductions on individual tax returns and not on corporate tax returns. It does not affect any tax credits.

Part three: Future income tax cuts would be tied to a growth trigger. Whenever the taxes that are the primary funding source of the general fund grow by more than 2 percent, then the excess would be used to compute a further reduction in income tax rates. It gets even more complicated from here, and I'll stop with this information.

What I feel is key is that we have to generate enough income to have a budget with a 7.5 percent ending balance. We have already cut over \$200 million in appropriations, and we don't yet know the number we need to pass a budget.

I have always said that we cannot and should not be like the federal government and spend more than we have. We still have to provide services to the state, and I personally don't see any more cuts we can make. I have yet to talk to anyone in northwest Kansas who wants the income tax rate to go to zero. Our concern is how to finance our schools, cities and counties?

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.

It's twister time again

If you've ever heard the stampeding sound of a tornado or been close enough to see fence posts, the side of a building or the steel of a grain bin twisting furiously as the dreaded black monster gobbles up the countryside, you'll remember it always.

Kansas ranks third in the nation in the number of tornadoes with an average of 61 per year since 1950, according to figures by the National Weather Service in Topeka. The most tornadoes occurred in 2008 when more than 180 tornadoes ravaged the Sunflower State. The fewest recorded were 14 in 1976.

Severe weather generally begins sometime after the first week of March in Kansas. Last year the tornado season began Feb. 28. Unfortunately, one of the eight tornadoes occurring that day struck Harveyville, resulting in damage, injuries and one death. The last tornado of the year touched down in Shawnee County on Sept. 17.

April 2012 was a record month in terms of tornado count. The 52 tornadoes logged surpassed the old April record of 46 set in 1964.

April 14 will go down as one of the more prolific days in severe weather history for central and southeastern Kansas. Twenty-four twisters touched down across 26 counties. Of these two dozen tornadoes, one was rated an EF4 (winds up to 199 mph) and two were rated as EF3s (winds up to 167 mph).



John Schlageck

• Insights

Kansas Farm Bureau

One surprising and fortunate statistic from this major storm outbreak was the lack of injuries and fatalities, considering the significant structural damage to several homes and businesses. Each of the tornadoes classified as violent or strong were reported up to one mile in width at several points along their particular paths.

Last year, 94 tornadoes tore through Kansas. The longest tornado tracked for 50.3 miles April 14 while moving through Rice, Ellsworth, McPherson and Saline counties.

The most costly twister occurred in Sedgewick County, resulting in \$500 million in damage including 38 injuries on April 14. Rush County reported the most in one county with 12.

And while no amount of structural damage will ever trump the tragedy of lives lost, the worst tornado, as far as loss of human life, occurred on May 25, 1955, in Udall. On that fateful day, 80 people died and 270 were injured,

according to Weather Service records.

Andover ranks as the second worst storm on record. Seventeen people died and another 302 were injured on April 26, 1991.

When it comes to safety during tornado season, the bottom line remains staying informed of possible severe weather conditions. Remember to listen to or stay up to date on conditions in your area, especially when severe thunderstorms and tornadoes are possible across a wide area.

Tornado warnings are issued with Doppler radar that indicates tornadoes are forming or a tornado has been sighted by a trained weather spotter. This warning will tell the location, and if possible, movement, estimated speed and towns located in the tornado path.

Think ahead during this severe weather season. Listen to forecasts daily, key into local weather conditions and know where the nearest shelter is. And remember, when a tornado threatens, immediate action may save you and your loved ones' lives.

Pay attention to the weather around you. Stay informed.

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.

Where to write, call

U.S. Sen. Pat Roberts, 109 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. (202) 224-4774
roberts.senate.gov/public/

U.S. Sen. Jerry Moran, 354 Russell Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510 (202) 228-6966.
Fax (202) 225-5124 moran.senate.gov/public/

U.S. Rep. Tim Huelskamp, 126 Cannon House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515. (202) 225-2715 or Fax (202) 225-5124. Web site: huelskamp.house.gov

State Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer, State Capitol Building, 300 SW 10th St., Room 136-E., Topeka, Kan. 66612, (785) 296-7399 ralph.ostmeyer@senate.state.ks.us

State Rep. Ward Cassidy, (120th District) State Capitol Building, 300 SW 10th St., Room 151-S, Topeka, Kan., 66612, (785) 296-7616 ward.cassidy@house.ks.gov

State Rep. Don Hineman, (118th District) State Capitol Building, 300 SW 10th St., Room 50-S, Topeka, Kan., 66612, (785) 296-7636 don.hineman@house.ks.gov

Mallard Fillmore

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