

Other Viewpoints

Sales tax extension should be allowed

When legislators left Topeka last month for their annual break that precedes what traditionally is supposed to be a brief "veto session," there wasn't sufficient support in the House to extend a sales tax that is set to expire, or "sunset," on June 30.

The idea of voting to extend that tax likely has caused considerable angst on the part of many state representatives in recent weeks, but it is something they should do.

There is no joy to be found here in coming to that conclusion, but the alternative, at least at this point, is unacceptable. Legislators have painted themselves into a corner on this one, in more ways than one. Last year, they passed and Gov. Sam Brownback signed income tax cuts – without eliminating some income tax deductions that would have softened the blow to the state's coffers – that haven't had time to yield the promised fruit, economic growth and higher state revenues.

The loss of income is pinching the state's finances and a lot of money or a lot of spending cuts are necessary to balance the budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1. The sales tax that is to expire June 30 is a source of additional dollars, several hundred million of them.

Legislators also have painted themselves into a corner in terms of time. They couldn't solve the budget problem before the recess and now must find a solution, one Brownback will sign off on, during the veto session, although the length of that session has proven to be flexible.

Brownback has shown no sign of yielding on his goal to eventually eliminate the state income tax. So there is no help to be found there.

During the recess, Brownback has been championing extension of the sales tax to maintain level funding of some services, including higher education.

Just how many votes the governor has swayed is unknown. Many Republican legislators have been criticizing for the past few years the 1 cent sales tax passed under a previous administration and the lawmakers who voted for it then, many of whom no longer serve in the Legislature. To vote to extend the sales tax in its entirety – 0.6 cents in to sunset while 0.4 cents will be retained to fund a transportation improvement program – is not something those who have been vehement in their opposition to it would relish.

They may find it to be a bitter pill, but it's one they should swallow.

Some elected officials at all levels of government delight in insisting all taxes are evil. But the simple truth is all levels of government are responsible for funding some services that cannot be ignored.

Ignoring that responsibility is not the answer.
– The Topeka Capital-Journal, via the Associated Press

Where to write, call

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

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

COLBY FREE PRESS

155 W. Fifth St. (USPS 120-920) (785) 462-3963
Colby, Kan. 67701 fax (785) 462-7749

Send news to: colby.editor@nwkansas.com

State award-winning newspaper, General Excellence, Design & Layout, Columns, Editorial Writing, Sports Columns, News, Photography. Official newspaper of Thomas County, Colby, Brewster and Rexford.

Sharon Friedlander - Publisher

sfriedlander@nwkansas.com

NEWS

Sports Reporter

colby.sports@nwkansas.com

Marian Ballard - Copy Editor

mballard@nwkansas.com

Sam Dieter - News Reporter

colby.editor@nwkansas.com

Heather Alwin - Society Editor

colby.society@nwkansas.com

ADVERTISING

colby.ads@nwkansas.com

Kathryn Ballard - Advertising Representative

kballard@nwkansas.com

Kylee Hunter - Graphic Design

khunter@nwkansas.com

BUSINESS OFFICE

Office Manager

Melissa Edmondson - Office Manager

medmondson@nwkansas.com

Evan Barnum - Systems Administrator

support@nwkansas.com

NOR'WEST PRESS

Richard Westfahl - General Manager

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THE COLBY FREE PRESS (USPS 120-920) is published every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, except the days observed for Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year's Day, by Nor'West Newspaper, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

PERIODICALS POSTAGE paid at Colby, Kan. 67701, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Colby Free Press, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

THE BUSINESS OFFICE at 155 W. Fifth is open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Friday, closed Saturday and Sunday. MEMBER OF THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, which is exclusively entitled to the use for publication of all news herein. Member Kansas Press Association and National Newspaper Association.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: In Colby, Thomas County and Oakley: three months \$35, one year \$85. By mail to ZIP Codes beginning with 676 and 677: three months \$39, one year \$95. Elsewhere in the U.S., mailed once per week: three months \$39, one year \$95. Student rate, nine months, in Colby, Thomas County and Oakley, \$64; mailed once per week elsewhere in the U.S. \$72.



Keep kids out of school safe on the farm

The dream of many young farm boys and girls is to ride on a tractor. For a youngster, the mammoth tractor epitomizes raw power, responsibility and coming of age.

Nothing is more exciting to farm kids than the belch of diesel smoke, the roar of engines and rubber wheels on powerful tractors, combines or silage cutters. They draw children like a moth to a flame and, like fire, can be dangerous. Such equipment can cut, crush or trap children. It can harm the ones we want to protect the most – our children.

Soon children will be home from school and the chance of farm accidents will be greater.

During the summer months, never invite children to ride in the tractor, says Holly Higgins, Kansas Farm Bureau safety director.

"Stress that your youngsters must stay away from machinery," Higgins says. "Never let them play or hide under or around machinery like tractors."

Farms offer children a unique environment to live, play, work and grow up. As a child, I can remember tossing a lasso around the grain auger and climbing into the grain bin of our combine. As a five-year-old, this giant silver machine symbolized for me the far away Rocky Mountains and I was scaling their peaks like my legendary hero, Jim Bridger.

Safety experts label agriculture one of the most hazardous occupations, and farm children are routinely exposed to the same hazards as their parents. Each year, hundreds of



John Schlageck

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children are killed, and thousands more are injured in farm-related incidents, according to National Safety Council statistics.

Education and awareness are the key ingredients to help make the farm a safer place for children to play, Higgins says. Brushing up on some of the potential hazards can also make it safer for parents.

Describe to children how horses can be fun to ride – with a helmet. Talk about how lambs and baby calves can be pleasurable to pet or feed.

"Remind them that while animals are fun to be around they can also bite, trample and stomp," Higgins says.

Discuss with your youngsters the signs that show an animal may be dangerous. Some of them include pawing the ground, snorting, raised hair and ears laid back.

Animals – even friendly ones – can be unpredictable. Have your children stay away from large ones. Emphasize they stay away from animals with newborn or young. Tell them to remain calm, speak quietly and move

slowly when around animals.

While barns, grain handling facilities and big buildings can be fun to play in, falls can occur or children may be exposed to harmful substances like chemicals and electricity.

Wide-open spaces also provide children with ideal playgrounds, Higgins notes. However, this isolation may also lead to difficulty finding help in the event of an emergency.

Explain the dangers associated with stored grain. Stress the principles that grain can entrap a person almost immediately. Children should never play around, or in grain that is stored in bins, trucks or wagons. Emphasize that it is difficult, or can be impossible, to pull even a child out of grain if he or she becomes trapped.

Remember, it is important that youngsters have a safe place to play. Ask them to identify safe play areas. Talk about areas away from farm machinery, animals, manure pits and silos. Carefully define safe boundaries. Let children know where they can and cannot play.

Make sure your children have a fun, but safe, summer on the farm.

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.

Sales tax debate a 'manufactured crisis'

As the Kansas Legislature reconvenes this week a fight over the sales tax will be the focus of attention. During a meeting with reporters during the legislative recess Governor Sam Brownback promoted his proposed extension of a temporary sales tax to cover the state's revenue shortfall by stating that legislators will have to "come around to reality" and accept the tax increase. He's right in that someone needs to face reality in Topeka.

Brownback's comment is just the latest in a pattern of smoke and mirrors, deception and downright deceit that have led up to this manufactured crisis. With the State Senate at odds with the House last year on a tax plan the governor's office asked moderate Senate leaders to pass the conservative tax plan on the table so as to move the process forward and on to a conference committee, which would supposedly iron out a compromise. At least that's how the process usually works.

But before a conference committee could be convened the governor's ally, House Speaker Mike O'Neal, abruptly cut off debate and called in the votes of House Republicans to concur with the Senate plan. Senate leaders were thus rewarded for their show of goodwill towards the governor with a figurative knife in their backs.

On signing day for the mammoth tax cuts Brownback beamed and announced that Kansas had made a choice between growing the government and growing the private sector, and saluted the choice of the latter. This disingenuous statement ignored the fact that approximately 70 percent of all state expenditures go to public education. That's right. This isn't Washington, where all discretionary spending of the federal government amounts to less than a third of the total budget, and education only a fraction of that. Kansas state



Alan Jilka

• A Voice of Reason

government is largely an education enterprise.

A more accurate characterization of Brownback's plan would have been to describe the policy choice as one between public education and tax cuts for the Koch brothers and other wealthy Kansans. Education was the big loser.

Since the bill's signing the dire predictions of budgetary red ink from non-partisan groups such as the Legislature's own research department have rapidly materialized. While legislators and school administrators struggle with how to fund a shrinking education footprint in our state Kansas, has been singled out for bipartisan criticism of its tax plan. *Governor Magazine* recently retained experts Joe Henchman of the conservative Tax Foundation and Nick Johnson of the left-leaning Center on Budget and Policy Priorities to analyze the tax policies of the 50 states. The duo concurred in singling out the Kansas tax plan as the nation's worst.

They were particularly critical of the plan's centerpiece, the elimination of taxes on owners of sole proprietorships, limited liability partnerships and sub-chapter S corporations. These individuals will now pay no business or individual state income tax. Henchman called the plan "an incentive to game the tax system without doing anything productive for the economy."

During the legislative recess Brownback has toured the state's regent institutions where

he has cynically tried to portray himself as the leader in Topeka resisting cuts in education funding. The governor feels he needs to at least pay lip service to the concerns of higher ed.

He apparently isn't worried about political pushback from the public schools education lobby after aggressively moving to strip teachers of collective bargaining rights. Ditto for cities and counties. The Kansas League of Municipalities and Kansas Association of Counties don't donate to political campaigns. So if local governments want to promote a sales tax issue to fund a special project such as a river walk, a jail expansion, recreation or aquatic center, big brother in Topeka can simply elbow local officials aside.

Meanwhile the governor, according to a recent article in the *Kansas City Star*, "appears increasingly detached from the fiscal realities he has imposed on his state ... treading perilously close to delusion." Yes, the artificial fiscal crisis Kansas currently faces is of the governor's own making. And he will eventually have to, in his words, "come around to reality."

Alan Jilka is a former Salina city commissioner and mayor. He was the Democratic nominee for Congress in the 1st District in 2010.

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