

Other Viewpoints

Food sales tax persists in Kansas

As a new fiscal year dawns, Kansas continues to compare unfavorably with its neighbors for its high sales-tax rate, especially with the 37 states that don't have a sales tax on food. And as income-tax cuts shrivel state revenues, legislators likely will need Kansans to keep paying sales tax on bread, milk, fruit and everything else on the grocery list. How frustrating – and just when the past two legislative sessions found genuine interest in each chamber in eliminating or at least easing the food-tax burden for all Kansans. The 2013 session ended with an agreement that will let the sales tax drop to 6.15 percent Monday, rather than reverting to 5.7 percent as promised by the 2010 Legislature. But in May, the Senate had voted unanimously to cut the sales tax on groceries to 4.95 percent starting next year. And in March 2012, the House voted to stop taxing groceries entirely. It was persuaded by the argument offered by then-Rep. Jana Goodman, R-Leavenworth, that “it’s kind of like taxing air. It just seems unfair to me to tax something people have to buy. That support was undeterred by estimates that it could mean a fiscal hit of \$300 million a year to the state.

Neither of those proposals made it to the finish line. In both years, the prevailing priority was keeping some semblance of government services while slashing income taxes. Worse, last year’s tax reform repealed a food sales-tax rebate program for the poorest Kansans. A partial restoration approved this year is an income-tax credit available only to those who actually pay taxes, so it won’t benefit those too poor to owe income tax.

True, paying 6.15 percent sales tax on food is better than paying the 6.3 percent rate that expires Sunday. But that’s no bargain considering the neighboring states either exempt food from sales tax (Nebraska, Colorado) or tax it at lower rates (Missouri, Oklahoma) – and the reality that many Kansans will still pay more than 8 percent sales tax because of city and county levies.

And as she touted the progress being made toward Gov. Sam Brownback’s goal of eliminating the state income tax, Senate President Susan Wagle, R-Wichita, said that she’s “excited about moving to a consumption tax.” Does that mean an even higher statewide sales tax is coming, on food and everything else?

Indeed, former state budget director Duane Goossen has estimated that if the state were to rely on the sales tax to pay for state government in the absence of an income tax, which currently represents 46.5 percent of state general-fund revenue, the rate of 6.3 percent would need to be doubled.

For now, it’s bad enough that Kansas is second only to Mississippi (7 percent) in charging the highest sales tax on food in the country, and that there is little political will to right this regressive wrong in Kansas tax policy.

– *The Wichita Eagle, 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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STARGAZERS HOLD ONLINE CONTEST TO NAME PLUTO'S TWO NEW MOONS...



Fike Park began as prairie dog town

Many people in Colby may not know that our community was already a town before it was even platted in 1885.

That’s because everything from what we now call Fourth Street in our downtown area to what is now Eighth Street was at first a thriving prairie dog town, with hundreds of those little rascals climbing all over everything. At that time, the pioneers could only imagine what Colby would be like today, especially the north end of it where our beautiful Fike Park is today.

When I was visiting the Prairie Museum recently, Opal Linville asked me if I would like to write about the history of Fike Park. She offered to loan me the folder she had made of everything the museum had on the history of the park. I was amazed at the amount of information in that folder. That park has a long, strange history.

When I got home, I started right in going through the information. It looks like it will take at least three or maybe four of my columns to tell the complete story. This is the first.

During my years of interviewing early settlers of the Colby and Gem areas, I often heard legends that were passed down through the years from one person to another. One



Marj Brown

• Marj’s Snippets

legend about Colby was that it would never have a tornado touch the ground in the main part of town because it sits in an old buffalo wallow and is too low for a tornado to settle in. Linville’s research confirmed the existence of that that legend.

It appears that in the spring, buffalo shed their winter fur and wallow on the ground to help in the shedding process. Along the Prairie Dog Creek on North Franklin, just north of the Rock Island Railroad tracks near the archery range, is where buffalo used to graze. Of course, there were no tracks then, nothing but prairie and the creek. The creek would drain in the low spot where Fike Park now sits. That low spot was made by the buffalo wallowing there.

I have only lived in Colby since 1948, but I don’t know of any tornados ever touching

down in the main Colby area. Several went around Colby and we have had many damaging straight-line winds.

Before we moved to Colby, I remember my aunt called by mother to tell her that a tornado went over town and broke all of the windows out of the second story of the old grade school at Third Street and Grant Avenue, but it didn’t touch the ground.

When my children were young, we had another tornado go through our neighborhood that took the tops of some trees, but it still didn’t touch the ground, so maybe there is something to that legend.

I wouldn’t get too careless, though. Our ground has a tendency to build up higher through the years. I still run to the basement when I hear a tornado warning. But of course, I lived my early years in Oklahoma City. I’m sure that might have caused me to become a scaredy cat.

Be sure to look for my next column about Fike Park.

Marj Brown has lived in Colby for 62 years and has spent a good deal of that time writing about people and places here. She says it’s one of her favorite things to do.

Overhaul transportation security costs

You probably think this doesn’t apply to you. Wrong. Even if you never enter an airport, your hard-earned dollars are paying big salaries and big benefits to thousands of federal workers of the Transportation Security Administration.

How many times a year do you fly on an airplane? Millions of Americans have never flown on a commercial plane and millions more have only flown a couple of times.

Statistics of who has and has not flown vary. Fifty million people in the United States are living in poverty and on Food Stamps. Are these people jet setting around the country? Another one hundred million people are still earning about \$40,000 or less each year. Do you think these individuals have lots of plane cash stashed aside?

Consider the millions who seldom take a vacation and prefer to drive when they do, and you start seeing a smaller number of frequent air travelers. How many people fly each year in the United States?

About 42 percent of U.S. adults reported traveling by air for leisure trips between August 2008 and July 2009. The percentage of air travelers increases to 48 percent among U.S. adults who traveled for business purposes, according to *travelhorizons*, July 2009.

Air travel hassles: A June 2008 study by the U.S. Travel Association revealed a deep frustration among air travelers that caused them to avoid an estimated 41 million trips over the past year at a cost of more than \$26 billion to the U.S. economy. Air travelers expressed little optimism for positive change, with nearly 50 percent saying that the air travel system is not likely to improve in the near future.

The avoided trips cost airlines more than \$9 billion in revenue, hotels nearly \$6 billion and restaurants more than \$3 billion. Federal, state and local governments lost more than \$4 billion in tax revenue because of reduced spending by travelers, the Air Travel Survey for 2008 shows. Check www.ustravel.org for more statistics.

Other Opinions

• Glenn Mollette American Issues

So let’s say 165 million Americans are flying occasionally while the other 165 million are driving or taking other transportation – or can’t afford to go anywhere. Why should half of the country that never flies be paying for something they never use? Plus, the payment is big.

The administration’s budget is over \$7.6 billion, compared to a \$3.2 billion green energy budget. The average paycheck for the 3,900 employees at the Washington office is \$103,852, while one executive made over \$5 million for nine months of work. The ranks of employees have grown from 16,500 to over 65,000. Like most government agencies, it continues to grow and devour more of your paycheck.

Airlines using private contractors should provide and pay the bill for those who watch the scanners and check the bags. The people who fly should pay the costs. Airplane tickets are high enough now. I fly occasionally. I really don’t want to pay more. However, it’s not fair for those who never fly to bear these costs. Government involvement means more burdens for more taxes on average Americans who are already stressed to the max on paying taxes.

Further, this agency is going too far in harassing people at the airports of America. Elderly people, little children and women are being violated and harassed every day in our country. What seemed like a good idea after 9/11 has become extreme.

I understand why the the agency came into existence, but like the Patriot Act, it needs

some edits and compromises. People now have to practically undress to get through security and are subjected to some stranger patting them down. This is a violation of our civil liberties.

I am not opposed to scanners that detect metal objects, people emptying their pockets and bag checks. However, subjecting people to pat downs and invasive x-rays has to be eliminated.

Every pilot or copilot should be allowed to carry a gun. We now have cabin doors that protect the cockpit crew from an intruder. These doors are vital to our flight security and cost thousands of dollars each. Every plane could have a U.S. marshal or designated plain-clothes security guard on board.

I agree that every airport should have armed officers to take someone to jail if necessary. Anyone posing a threat should be detained and escorted to jail.

I am a believer in transportation security, but we must overhaul the role of the Transportation Security Administration and who pays for it.

Glenn Mollette, of Newburgh, Ind., is author of "American Issues," "Every American Has an Opinion," and other articles, features and books. Contact him at gmlollette@aol.com.

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Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

