

Other Viewpoints

Heed hospitals about Medicaid

Gov. Sam Brownback is reluctant to expand Medicaid because he is concerned that the federal government won't honor its promise to pay for it. He should be more concerned about how KanCare isn't paying Kansas hospitals. And how not allowing the Medicaid expansion hurts the hospitals even more.

When Brownback proposed having private insurance companies manage Medicaid, hospitals and other providers worried about not being paid on time. After all, that is what happened in other states that privatized Medicaid. But Brownback officials said that incentives in the contracts with the insurance companies would help ensure timely payments.

Almost 10 months into privatization, that isn't happening. Hospitals across the state are still fighting to get paid.

In "the past three months, we've averaged approximately 400-plus thousand dollars a month in denials," Matt Leary, the chief financial officer at Wesley Medical Center in Wichita, told *The Eagle*. That's more than five times what Wesley averaged last year.

Via Christi Health has had similar problems, seeing a nearly 50 percent increase in Medicaid claims that remained unpaid 90 days or more.

Smaller hospitals are also frustrated. Allen Van Driel, chief executive of Smith County Memorial Hospital near the Nebraska border, recently said his hospital had yet to receive a single correct payment from one insurance company.

"The party line is that the managed-care plans are working and that KanCare is a huge success, that it's processing claims and all that," Van Driel told the Kansas Health Institute New Service. "But that's simply not factual."

Sandra Montes, the director of patient financial services at Southwest Medical Center in Liberal, complained that "we sometimes feel like we're beating our heads against the wall."

Brownback officials have described such problems as "bumps in the road." But these bumps are causing big headaches for hospitals.

Hospitals will be hurt even more by Brownback's refusal to allow a federal expansion of Medicaid. That is because fewer patients will have health insurance and because the Affordable Care Act reduces payments to hospitals that serve low-income uninsured patients (in expectation that those patients will join Medicaid).

As for Brownback's fear that the federal government won't honor its funding promise, U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius addressed that at a Council of State Governments conference last weekend in Kansas City, Mo. She noted that the expansion is "fully funded within the health care bill" and that states can always opt out later if the federal government reneges on the funding.

Sebelius also said that the important conversations that need to happen are between state political leaders and the local hospitals and communities that will "bear the cost of uncompensated care."

The hospitals are talking. Will Brownback listen?

—*The Wichita Eagle, via the Associated Press*

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Sharon Friedlander - Publisher
sfriedlander@nwkansas.com

NEWS

R.B. Headley - Sports Editor
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

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support@nwkansas.com

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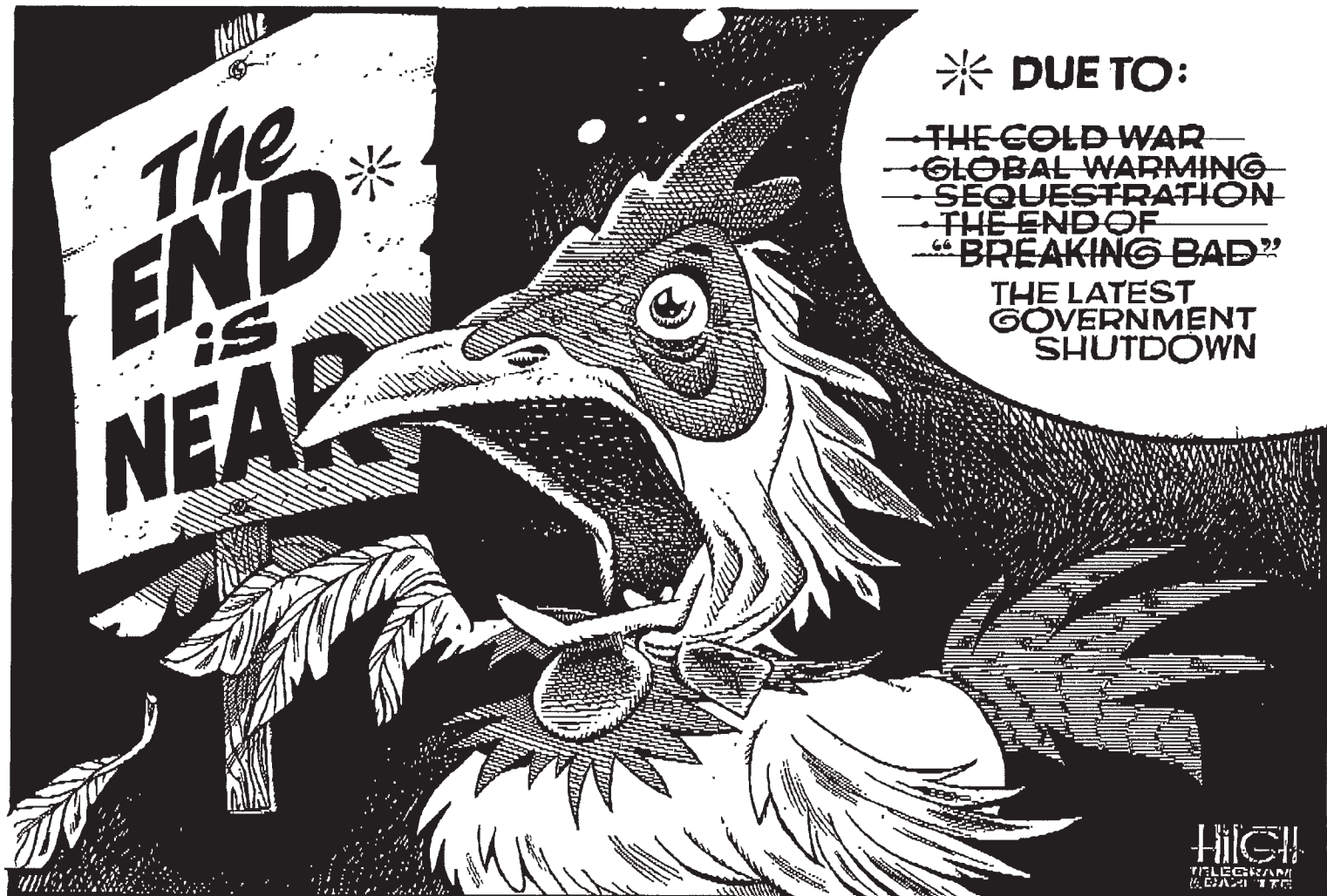
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Baseball retires one of the greats

If you're a baseball fan, you know about Todd Helton, who stepped out of "The Show" Sunday at Dodger Stadium after 17 glorious years with the Colorado Rockies.

If you're not, let me tell you.

Helton played all his 17 years in Major League Baseball wearing No. 17 for the Rockies, and that itself is an accomplishment not that many Hall of Fame players can claim.

His stellar hitting and precise fielding gave him statistics that impress: category after category in the top 100 players in records kept for well over a century. If anyone is a shoo-in for the Hall of Fame, it's Todd Helton.

But until the last week, Helton, who's normally pretty shy, has tried to keep out of the limelight as much as he could — for a guy whose workday involved 30,000 to 40,000 onlookers. In his retirement week, though, he seemed to enjoy the attention, taking curtain calls in Denver and Los Angeles, leading the team around the field to shake hands with fans after the final home game.

He gave his farewell in a recording on the big scoreboard screen, but I'm sure he'd have choked up if he'd tried to do it live. After the game, even the Boston Red Sox players waited to shake his hand.

What a night that was. Before the game, the Rockies presented Helton and his family with a horse. His wife and daughters were with him to share the moment. The fans stood and cheered every time he took the field or stepped to the plate. And at the start of the ninth inning, his daughters ran out and stole first base, dragging it off as a souvenir.



Steve Haynes

• Along the Sappa

Oh, and how he responded. He knocked the ball out of the park his first time up, drove in a run with a sacrifice fly the next time and still another with a double (No. 592 in his career). All that made for one long game, marred only by the fact that the Rockies lost 15-5 to the best-in-baseball Red Sox.

Helton's statistics place him squarely among the all-time stars: five all-star games, the 2000 National League batting title, three Gold Gloves at first, four Silver Sluggers, 2,519 hits (93rd all-time), 316 lifetime batting average (69th), 414 on-base percentage (26th), 2,247 games played (121st), 1,401 runs scored (91st), 592 doubles (first among active players, 16th all-time), 369 home runs (74th), 1,406 runs batted in (72nd), 1,335 walks (35th), 998 extra-base hits (36th).

On defense, he was even better: double plays made 2,028 (third), errors 79 (sixth lowest), games at first 2,178 (fifth), putouts at first 18,889 (13th), fielding percentage 996 (sixth). His salary topped \$20 million in 2011.

Just the list of 15 players who hit more doubles is enough to give a baseball person goosebumps: Tris Speaker 792, Pete Rose 746, Stan Musial 725, Ty Cobb 724, Craig Biggio 668,

George Brett 665, Napoleon Lajoie 657, Carl Yastrzemski 646, Honus Wagner 640, Henry Aaron 624, Paul Molitor and Paul Waner 605, Cal Ripken Jr. 603, Barry Bonds 601, Luis Gonzales 596. Of those, only Musial, Biggio, Brett, Yastrzemski and Ripkin — and Helton, of course — played their entire career for one team.

He was known not just as a great player and a nice guy, but as a practical joker, a tenacious opponent and a leader on the field. He was a baseball star at Tennessee, but also was in line to be the starting quarterback until he was pushed aside by a younger guy named Peyton Manning. They are fast friends to this day.

Sunday, the final game of the season began with a video tribute prepared by the Dodgers and famed announcer Vin Scully. The fans stood and cheered, as they would every time he came up. The Dodgers stood and cheered.

The Rockies closed the year by beating the Dodgers in their last two games, 1-0 and 2-1.

And at the end of the last night, when Helton came up for the very last time, everyone — the Dodgers, the fans, his teammates — stood and cheered, clapped and shouted. Helton struck out, but it didn't matter. He tipped his hat and got "high-fives" all the way through the dug-out.

Steve Haynes is president of Nor'West Newspapers. When he has the time, he'd rather be reading a good book or casting a fly.

Is the answer blowing in the wind?

With each passing day there's more interest in the Grain Belt Express Clean Line transmission project. This is the proposed direct current (DC) electric transmission line that would run from near Spearville north and east across the state to the Kansas-Missouri border.

Thousands of farmers and ranchers who live and work along the proposed route of this project may need to alter their practices if the line is built across their property.

Like other Kansans, farmers and ranchers understand the importance of developing our state's wind resources. They also realize that in order to maximize the potential for wind development, transmission lines are necessary to move power to population centers across the state and the nation.

If Grain Belt is successful in building this transmission line, nearly 1,000 more wind towers could go online in southwestern Kansas. This could result in an economic boom for a part of the state that is reeling from extended drought and the impact of the declining Ogallala Aquifer on the grain and feedlot industries.

Utilities building transmission lines in Kansas should look at options that minimize the impact on landowners and create positive long-term relationships between agriculture and industry.

Compensation should be paid annually and based on the fair market value of the property impacted by transmission line easements or restrictions, says Mike Irvin, Kansas Farm Bureau legislative counsel. If lines impact farm or ranching operations or requires alteration of facilities, those expenses should be included in any compensation package.

"Sittings should be located along section or



John Schlageck

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property lines," Irvin says. "Landowners may be able to maximize the potential of their land and minimize logistical inconvenience — even if a line is built on their property."

Developers must restore damage to grasslands and compensate for crop damage resulting from activity associated with the building, maintenance and operation of the line.

"Transmission line easements often try to shift or place liability for any unintended or inadvertent damage to structures to the landowner," Irvin says. "The KCC should require developers to assume and manage that risk."

Transmission lines have the potential to interfere with modern agricultural technologies that is expensive and provides necessary, valuable data to farmers and ranchers about their production practices.

"We strongly suggest that before the KCC approves any transmission line routes in Kansas, that studies be conducted to show potential impacts and efforts be made by developers to minimize interference to landowners, their property and operations."

Are there other unknown and possible unintended consequences?

Consider the following: there has been no discussion of the impact or location of generator lead lines that will connect wind tow-

ers with the conversion station. There are no restrictions to prevent other power generation companies from accessing the line or to prevent power produced outside of Kansas from connecting with the project.

All Kansas citizens, landowners and businesses deserve a thorough examination of these issues before final approval is given. The Kansas Corporation Commission will conduct an evidentiary hearing, open to the public, concerning the proposed Clean Line project.

The hearing is slated for 9 a.m., Tuesday through next Thursday, in the first floor hearing room at the Kansas Corporation Commission Topeka office, 1500 S.W. Arrowhead Road.

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/

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

