

commentary

from our viewpoint...

More taxes won't solve underlying problems

There is plenty of room to argue about whether Kansas needs a tax increase. It doesn't matter, because people seem to be dead set against it, and there is little chance the Legislature will pass one. Officials say the state faces a \$426 budget "gap," the difference between projected needs and what the state has to spend in the coming fiscal year, starting July 1. Needs are up because the recession has put more pressure on social programs, and because the state has promised more money to schools, colleges, transportation and other programs.

Some of these "needs" are not going to be met. Despite an ambitious (some would say overreaching) program to increase school spending by the state Board of Education, for instance, educators know they are likely to see only a few million more, if anything at all. At best, they'll get just a few dollars for each student in the state. The governor submitted his budget based on currently available money, which projects sharp cuts in many state programs. He ordered agencies to cut their spending plans by about 2 percent. This would involve abandoning some highway projects, shutting down five minimum-security prisons and actually cutting per-pupil spending for schools.

No one thinks this budget will pass. In fact, there's more than a little speculation the projected cuts were sort of a scare tactic to help the governor push his tax-hike agenda.

He submitted the budget based on current revenue, as required by law. But in his State of the State message, Gov. Bill Graves asked for tax hikes totaling about \$228 million, enough to increase school spending, keep the prisons open (and presumably prevent any early releases), protect social services and save the highway projects. Road taxes would bear the brunt of the increases. The fuel tax would go up 1 cent per gallon, and registration fees would be increased 3 percent. The sales tax would go up one-quarter of 1 percent, while income taxes would be held flat and General fund "transfers" to the transportation fund would be stopped, allowing that money to go for schools and social programs.

A major sin tax, on tobacco, would also be increased, by a whopping 65 cents per pack. Smokers, apparently, would bear a disproportionate share of the school burden.

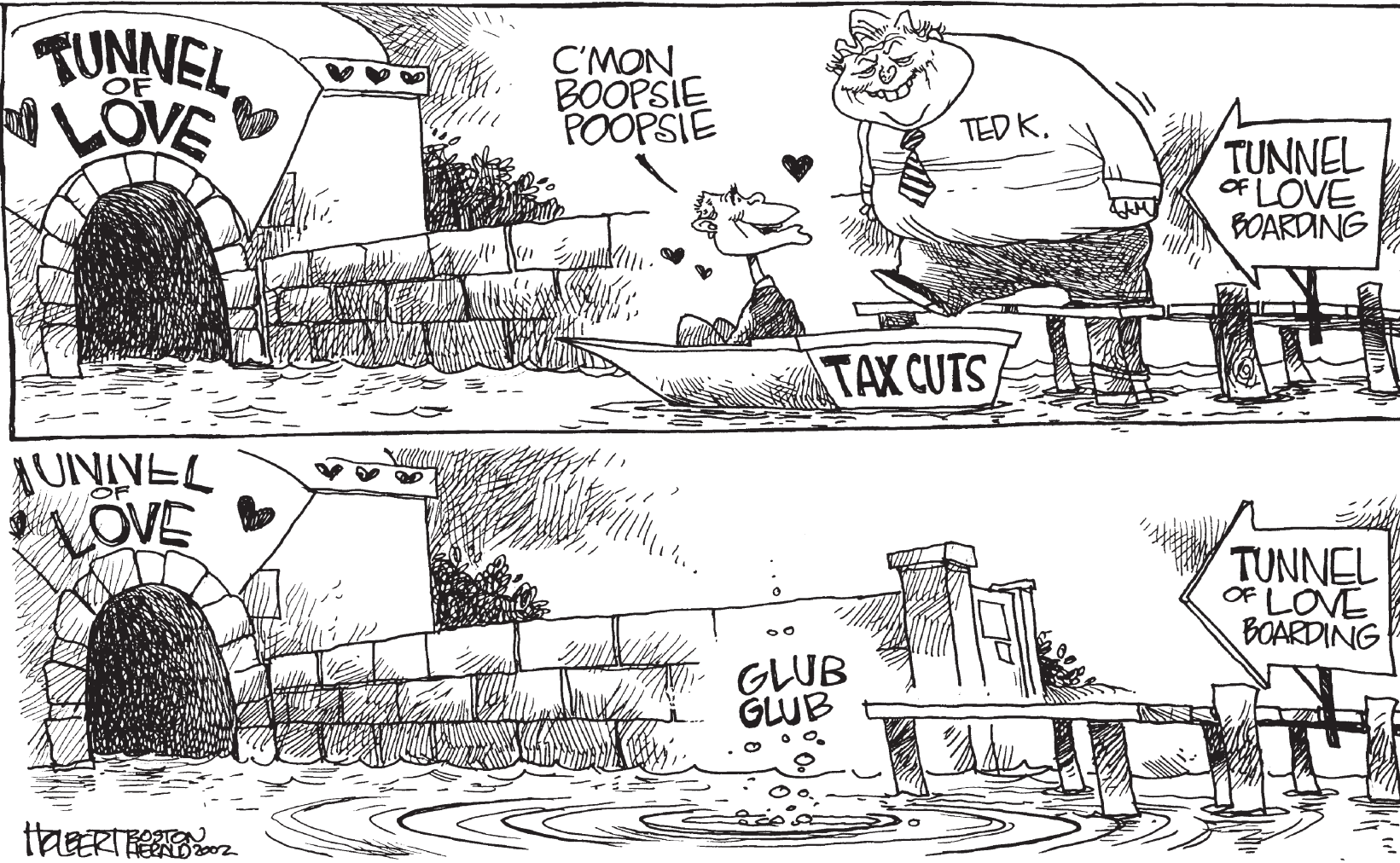
Overall, it seems better to increase the road taxes than sales or income taxes, which are high enough already. The governor points out that if we raise those basic taxes much more, the state starts to be non-competitive compared to its neighbors.

But with the sharp decline in fuel prices this year, few people are likely to notice an extra penny of tax for the highway department. Kansas saw the result of poor road maintenance in the 1980s, and we don't want to go back to those days.

We could back a small increase in the road tax if it staves off cuts in the current 10-year transportation plan. The sales and cigarette tax hikes, though, are out of line.

When times were good, in the early '90s, the state gave us millions of dollars in tax breaks. Now, when times are tough, we can afford to let the state have a little of that back. We'll still be ahead, and state services will be preserved.

The goal of conservatives to cut the size of government will be met. And things in Topeka will keep on flowing. But it's hard to see that anything will happen. — Steve Haynes



How much is enough?



diana west

- commentary

Cheri Sparacio lost her husband, Thomas, in the south tower of the World Trade Center on Sept. 11. Mrs. Sparacio, 37, has two young children and is expecting her third. Her grief, like that of thousands of families recently shattered by terrorism, is an emotion the rest of us empathize with, surely, but fail to comprehend at its most private and painful source.

Her grievance against the U.S. government, though, is a matter of public record, and, as such, is more transparent. Along with 40 other victims of the September attacks, Sparacio recently joined several members of Congress at a New York City news conference to decry the federal Victim Compensation Fund. This fund, unique in American history, was established by Congress in September to "compensate" the survivors of those lost on Sept. 11 using \$5 billion to \$7 billion of taxpayer money, the idea being that they would be fairly and quickly paid without going to court.

The survivors' complaint? Some say the cash awards, expected to average \$1.6 million according to the formula devised by the fund's special master Kenneth Feinberg, are plain stingy. "I'd end up with an amount that I'd have to be sick to take," Sparacio told the New York Daily News. "The money would not secure my future or my children's futures." Such harsh comments tend to be overlooked these days, or to elicit more or less philosophical conjecture about the difficulties in calculating a life's worth. But that's all beside the point. The real question is, did the government — and by extension, the taxpayers — set out to "secure" anyone's future? Is that even possible? Should it be?

"On September 11, we had thousands of good people who were murdered ... by Osama bin Laden," said Rep. Peter King (R-N.Y.). "It would be terrible if the families of those victims were victimized again by the regulations that are being enacted by the special master." Victimized again? "We're talking about a \$250,000 cap," said Rep. Felix Grucci (R-N.Y.), referring to fund's "pain and suffering" award — more, by the way, than benefits paid to families of soldiers killed in the line of duty. "You could slip and fall on the sidewalk as you walk out of here — and I'm not suggesting that anybody do that — but probably earn more on a slip-and-fall claim than these people will get for losing their loved ones."

Some of the time, at least, the old "slip-and-fall claim" — slippery though it may be when some poor schmo has to take the fall — involves a party guilty of negligence. Who, besides Osama bin Laden, is guilty here — the United States government? That would seem to be the implication of the federal fund. Is the government also culpable, then, for anthrax attacks that have taken three lives? Their next-of-kin will receive no federal largesse. The survivors of the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing weren't "compensated" by a special fund, either. Neither were the survivors of those killed

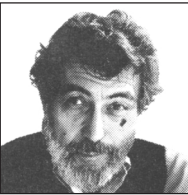
in the first World Trade Center bombing; nor were the survivors of those Americans killed when Pan Am Flight 103 was blown up over Lockerbie, Scotland. What about the Unabomber's victims? And dare anyone ask about victims of future acts of terrorism? Will the Victim Compensation Fund become a permanent entitlement?

To question the government's role is not to suggest the afflicted receive nothing. A generous nation has already donated more than \$1.6 billion to charitable organizations to aid the grieving survivors of the roughly 3,000 people killed in the attacks. Should such a sum, along with varying degrees of assistance offered by the organizations hit in the attacks and two years of government-granted tax amnesty, be designated "enough"? Of course not. That is, nothing is "enough" to patch the holes left by the grievous human toll. But whether it is government's place to fill the void — to "secure" the victims' futures — is another question.

Thomas Connor lost a relative in the World Trade Center on Sept. 11. He also lost his father in the FALN bombing of New York City's Fraunces Tavern in 1975. Writing in The Wall Street Journal recently, he suggested that rather than attempting to provide "compensation" for all lives lost, the government consider a more selective measure: providing "compassionate aid" to families who now find themselves in financial difficulties. Such a program would be designed to tide people over, not secure anyone's future — and would seem to be the best outlet for the government's good intentions.

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Who's that knocking at my door?



nat hentoff

- commentary

The Christian Science Monitor has been publishing since 1908, and as a boy in Boston, I often visited its huge global map room, which taught me a lot about geography. The Monitor has instructed me for many years, most recently — and rather dramatically — by a Jan. 8 story filed by Kris Axtman in the paper's Houston bureau.

"Political dissent can bring federal agents to (your) door," she told of a visit by FBI agents and the Secret Service to Houston's Art Car Museum. They were investigating a tip that "anti-American activity" was going on there. They found, Axtman reported, "an exhibit on past U.S. covert operations and government secrets."

The museum's docent, Donna Huanca, asked her visitors, after they showed their badges and said why they had come, "What's anti-American about free speech?"

Barry Reingold of San Francisco had reason to ask the same question when two FBI agents announced themselves on the intercom at the residence of the 60-year-old retired phone company worker.

They told him that a fellow weightlifter at his gym had called the FBI to report that Reingold is a disloyal American. This, as Reingold told the Christian Science Monitor, is what led to the FBI's visit:

At the gym, "discussion had turned to bin Laden and what a horrible murderer he was. I said, 'Yeah, he's horrible and did a horrible thing, but Bush has nothing to be proud of. He is a servant of the big oil companies, and his only interest in the Middle East is oil.'"

The president has disproved that charge by his support of Israel and his criticism of Yasser Arafat, but some newspaper columnists and Democratic Party operatives have also spoken negatively of Bush's alleged ties to big oil companies. Will the FBI be knocking at their doors? Or, are only average citizens subject to in-person investigations of their loyalty to the United States?

In the Houston Art Car Museum, the federal agents were diligent in their probe. As the Christian Science Monitor quoted Donna Huanca, "the G-men puzzled over each art installation, sneering and saying things like, 'What's that supposed to mean?'"

The bureau might consider training its agents on how to decode abstract expressionism in painting. I can't.

In North Carolina, two Secret Service agents and a Raleigh police officer questioned A.J. Brown, a

student at Durham Technical Community College, for 40 minutes in her doorway. She didn't let them into her apartment because they did not have a search warrant. She knew her constitutional rights.

But from the doorway, these specialists in un-American activities could see, as Kris Axtman reported, "a poster of George W. Bush holding a noose. I read, 'We hang on your every word.'" The noose was not around his neck. The poster was critical of Bush's unwavering support of the death penalty while he was governor of Texas.

Reacting to Axtman's story, Barry Steinhardt, associate director of the American Civil Liberties Union in Washington said, "It's a very frightening trend: that people are doing nothing more than expressing the very freedoms that we are fighting to preserve and find themselves with the FBI at the door."

What is more troubling is that Attorney General John Ashcroft is reintroducing the FBI's COINTELPRO operation that, from 1957 to 1971, monitored a wide range of religious and political anti-war and civil rights organizations. The FBI also infiltrated and, with false internal messages, disrupted some of them. In 1975, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Activities denounced COINTELPRO's violations of First

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