

# commentary

from other pens...

## Closing local offices a way to cut budget

### Parsons Sun on social services cuts:

The news may have been a little difficult for some to swallow when Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services Secretary Janet Schalansky announced she would begin the new year with the closure of 23 county offices to help meet certain cuts in the budget. Her three-year plan is for closure of 70 of the 105 offices.

Also under consideration but as yet unspecified are cuts in services for the disabled and mentally ill, cuts in child care services and changes in medical insurance coverage for children of working families. In all, the cuts total more than \$40 million each year.

This is one of the first plans being announced to deal with the state's tight budget. The picture isn't pretty and each day it gets worse...

While politicians say they can prevent tax increases by cutting out fat, abuse, overhead and tightening administration, who's out there making sure that the cuts are in those areas rather than in the client services sector? Who will be the watchdog?

It has to be Kansans, themselves.

... Just as when Medicare fraud is best detected by the patient questioning billing practices, poorly run state services will best be detected by the clients who observe from within.

When the state spends more than 68 percent of its budget on education and the public says that amount should be increased, there just isn't much left from which to make the severe cuts necessary. Every one of them will have to be smart, with as little client impact as possible.

Only if the public acts as watchdogs will that really happen.

### The Salina Journal on candidates who hide:

There is something spooky about political candidates who won't face the public.

It is even scarier when these no-shows win at the polls.

That's the case in eastern Kansas, where State Board of Education candidate Iris Van Meter, Thayer, won the 9th District GOP primary even though she refused to participate in any public candidate forums. Additionally, Van Meter would not talk to the media...

Her strategy speaks to the old saying, "It is better to be thought a fool than to open one's mouth and remove all doubt."

... We hope the same tactic is not adopted by fellow Republican Phill Kline, candidate for Kansas Attorney General. Kline's opponent is Democrat Chris Biggs, Geary County attorney.

... Kline dropped out of two big debates scheduled for next week. One was a combined effort by the chambers of commerce from eight Johnson County communities. The other was scheduled for the Kansas Children's Service League conference, a gathering that draws several hundred child advocates.

... Kline's spokesperson said scheduling conflicts came up. No other details were offered.

Granted, Kline and Biggs have debated four times already, so we don't think Kline is shy about opening his mouth. At least so far.

Add that question to a growing list of queries, including why Kline refuses to release his income tax returns, and why fellow Kansas political figures recommended against his appointment for U.S. attorney.

Also, voters deserve more information on the \$8,100 Federal Election Commission fine issued against Kline for his failure to report \$72,000 in campaign contributions he received during a 2000 bid for Congress...



## Canadian loan businesses are not a good choice

Dear Attorney General Stovall:

I have had bad credit for several years. I was recently needing a loan and saw an advertisement in the local classifieds that said "credit problems OK." It said applications could be taken over the phone. When I called the 1-800 number I was told the company could take my application over the phone and I was asked to fax a copy of a recent pay stub, my driver's license, and social security card. I was desperate for a quick loan, so I sent the information. The company called me back the next day and said that I was approved for a \$5000 loan, but because of my past credit problems I would need to send a 10 percent down payment. I sent a wire transfer by Western Union to Canada. That was four weeks ago and I have not heard anything else from the company! The phone number I originally called has been disconnected. Attorney General Stovall, can anything be done to recover my money?

Dear Kansas Consumer:

Consumers should always be aware of any group that asks them to send copies of their identification; especially out of the country. Sending cash



carla j. stovall

• consumer corner

by money order is also a red flag as wire transfers are virtually untraceable. Not only is the consumer out the "down payment," there is a good chance of his or her identity being stolen. My office has found that these groups often set up in hotel rooms for two or three weeks and then move to another location. They pay for the newspaper ads with stolen credit cards and will set up 1-800 numbers on cell phones with a stolen identity.

My office sent your complaint to the Canadian authorities to investigate. I strongly encourage any consumer to question any groups offering "easy loans" to those who have credit problems or have gone through bankruptcy. Most often these groups that advertise in newspapers are not legitimate and

consumers who send their money will never see it again. If you need a loan, use a local financial institution or a well-established national company. If you have credit problems, businesses promising to fix your credit and/or provide financing regardless of your credit history will simply make your financial situation worse by charging you for services you can perform

for free or by providing credit on terms you can't afford. Fixing credit problems is a long-term project without a short term fix.

Attorney General Carla J. Stovall offers this public service to help you avoid becoming a victim of consumer fraud. Although some of the details have been changed, the cases appearing in this column are based on actual complaints. For further information or to file a complaint, please write Attorney General Carla J. Stovall, Consumer Protection Division, 120 SW 10th, 2nd Floor, Topeka, Kansas 66612, or call the toll-free Consumer Hotline, 1-800-432-2310. Leave your name, number and subject of your inquiry with the receptionist and your call will be returned promptly.

## Candidates won't talk honestly about budget

Hooley.  
Poppycock.  
Blarney.  
Flapdoodle and garbage.

Whatever words voters want to use, they're still getting plenty of it whenever the major party candidates for governor talk about the state's budget problems.

Democrat Kathleen Sebelius and Republican Tim Shallenburger continue to make promises they almost certainly can't keep, draw up plans that will be nearly impossible to execute and perpetuate a fantasy that they can solve Kansas' financial difficulties without inflicting much pain.

The irony is that under some scenarios, promises to make government more efficient, conduct a top-to-bottom review of state agencies or go after welfare and tax cheats would be significant. But Sebelius and Shallenburger have made too many promises for those scenarios to play out.

A review of the state's financial problems starts with revenue projections for the current fiscal year. The official forecast is that the state will collect a little more than \$4.5 billion during the current fiscal year, enough to cover its \$4.4 billion in spending.

But no one familiar with the budget expects that prediction to hold. Revenues fell \$212 million short of expectations for fiscal 2002. Legislative leaders and State Budget Director Duane Goossen expect the same for fiscal 2003.

If the state collected \$4.3 billion, the current assumption of the Legislative Research Department, it would have to cut \$103 million from current spending to avoid a deficit on June 30.

If it collected less — and some officials worry that it might — the required cuts would be larger.

In their last report on the budget, legislative researchers also assumed modest growth in fiscal 2004, leaving the state with revenues of about \$4.44 billion.

If that seems optimistic, state officials and university economists are likely to consider more pessimistic numbers when they meet — on Nov. 5, Election Day — to issue new revenue forecasts.

In addition, the state supported some programs in the 2003 budget with about \$94 million in fed-



john hanna

• ap news analysis

eral funds that won't be available again in fiscal 2004. The state must either cut those programs back, or shift money from someplace else.

But the problems Sebelius and Shallenburger create for themselves in trying to solve the state's budget problems start with transportation spending.

Both have said they will protect the state's \$13.6 billion, comprehensive transportation program, started in 1999.

The Legislative Research Department estimates that, under Kansas law, keeping the program whole will divert \$193 million in general tax revenues to highway projects.

Keeping the promise lowers available revenues for everything else to \$4.25 billion in fiscal 2004, using researchers' latest scenario.

The promise would force Sebelius or Shallenburger to find at least \$164 million in cuts over 18 months, just to prevent a budget deficit on June 30, 2004. That's 3.7 percent of the current budget.

But both Sebelius and Shallenburger have promised not to cut aid to public schools, some \$2.3 billion, or 52 percent of the entire budget.

With that promise, cuts must be made from the remaining \$2.1 billion in spending. That \$164 million would represent almost 8 percent of everything else.

Shallenburger has said an average 10 percent cut in everything else would be reasonable, but such reductions would in fact be difficult to achieve.

The higher education system; social services for the poor, elderly and disabled; and the prison system account for most of that remaining spending, about \$1.7 billion in all.

The prison system seems an unlikely candidate for big cuts, given continuing increases in the inmate population.

So, too, does the Department of Social and Re-

habilitation Services, where any cuts — closing offices, reducing child care for working families, raising health insurance premiums for those same families and cutting spending on services to the disabled and mentally ill — are offset by increased costs in federally mandated medical services.

In the Department on Aging, 86 percent of the budget is consumed by reimbursements to nursing homes that care for elderly Kansas, payments federal law says must be based on costs.

Those factors point to the higher education system as the biggest potential target.

Yet, asked last week whether he could trim 10 percent from higher education spending, Shallenburger said simply, "I don't know."

But if Shallenburger's task looks difficult, consider that Sebelius is promising not to cut higher education spending either. That means in her administration, 68 percent of the total budget is off limits.

She'd have to find her \$164 million with only \$1.4 billion left on the table — most of it in social services and prisons.

Pressed last week to explain where she would find enough savings she said: "Well, that's what we've got to look for."

Voters deserve better. The choices facing Kansans are tough and stark, and any course of action is likely to involve some significant pain.

But instead of hearing an intelligent debate on the budget from the major party candidates, voters are getting flapdoodle.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Correspondent John Hanna has covered state government and politics for the Associated Press since 1987.

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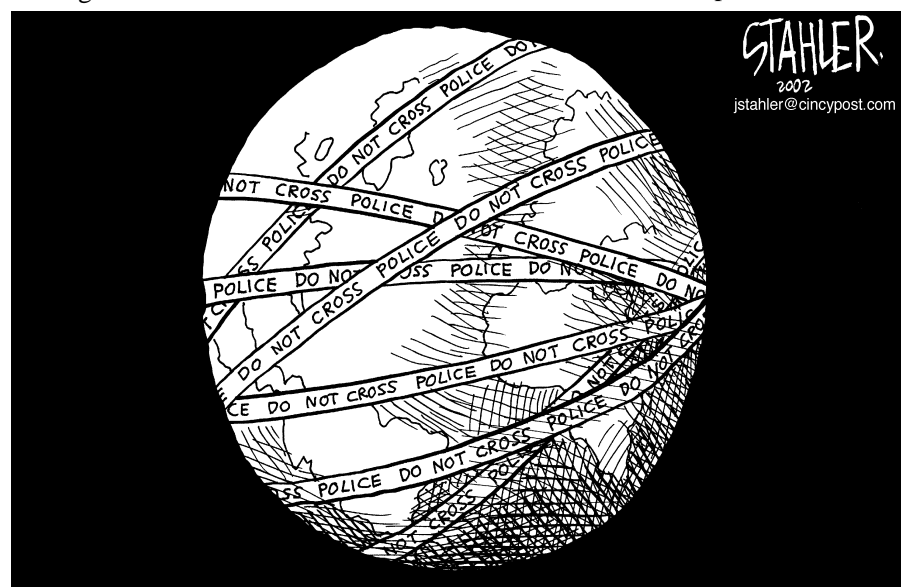
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