

commentary

from other pens...

Government raises must be balanced

President Bush is taking the heat for blocking a scheduled 18.6 percent raise for most federal workers.

Eighteen point six percent? The raise was due next year under a law setting up automatic raises for government workers which don't have to be approved by Congress. An across-the-board hike of 3.1 percent will go through, and that will be a lot more than most workers in the private sector — or in state and local government for that matter — will see this year.

It's hard to figure how the formula ground out a raise of that magnitude in a year when inflation is around 2.4 percent. The 3.1 percent hike is more than generous, and the president left it alone.

The larger increases would have come under a provision for adjustments for "locality," whatever that is. It supposedly was based on wage surveys in various regions of the country by the Labor Department.

Whatever the surveys show, there is just no need for the government to give pay hikes of nearly one-fifth of a worker's pay in this economy.

There are plenty of people looking for work, and the government doesn't need to pay that much to get good employees. Federal jobs already outrank many comparable civilian positions. Benefits, job security and working conditions tend to be superior.

There just is no shortage of federal employees. Besides, the rest of us are not getting an 18.6 percent raise next year. Many businesses, stung by the continuing recession, won't be giving raises at all. Many big firms are laying off workers, not hiring them.

State and local governments, especially schools, are pinched by a budget crunch that stretches from coast to coast. State workers, city employees and public school teachers won't be getting much of a raise. Many will be lucky to keep their jobs as state after state struggles to close the budget gap.

The president rightly pointed out that the federal government, struggling with a recession-induced deficit, can hardly afford the raises, either. That's what moved him to veto them. He said that the raises would bust the budget, or the government would have to make massive cuts in its work force, and neither choice was acceptable.

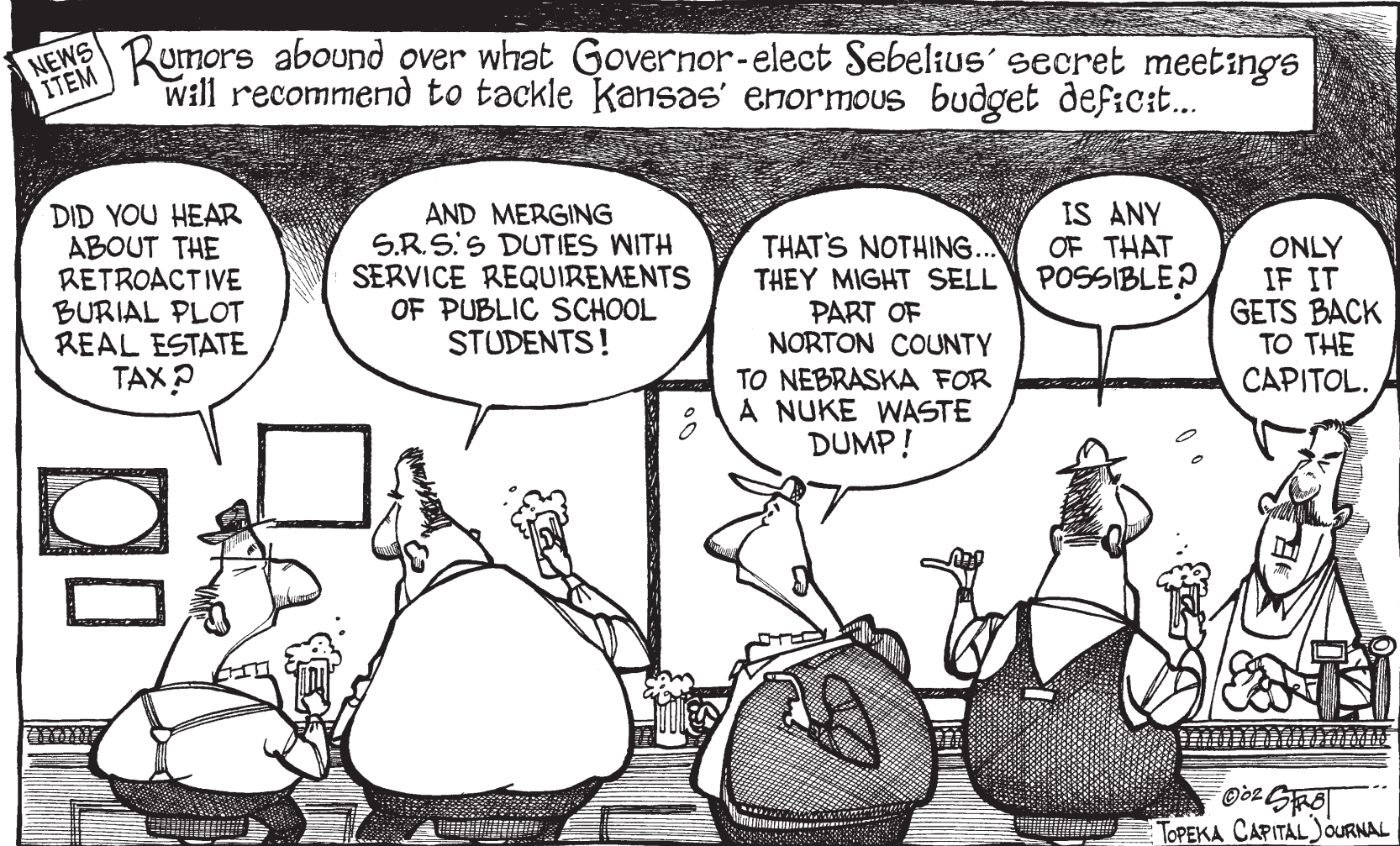
That's good thinking. And while federal employees may be disappointed — who could blame them — it's just not fair to expect taxpayers to ante up that kind of money, not when they are hurting as bad as they are this year.

The recession has been tough on us all. Maybe next year, it'll ease off and everyone will start to breathe a little easier.

Until then, though, belts are tightened, and raises approaching 20 percent are out of the question.

Maybe the real problem is with Congress, which set up a formula to deal with raises rather than having to vote on this hot potato. As often happens, the formula eventually amounts to giving away the store.

But in tough times, do we expect Congress to make tough decisions? Don't count on it. — *Steve Haynes*



Facing the season of eating and leftovers

'Tis the season of too much and leftovers.

I hit the store — along with every other American female — on Wednesday afternoon. I needed everything.

Well, not everything. Mom was bringing the turkey. But, I did need the makings for pies, stuffing, cranberry sauce, apple salad and sweet potatoes.

I grabbed an extra loaf of bread. What with making stuffing and having extra people, I would probably need it. An extra dozen eggs went in on top of the canned pumpkin and fresh cranberries.

I skipped the margarine and flour for crusts, the apples and nuts, the white potatoes and gravy mix. I had plenty of all those things at home — at least I hoped I did.

Just as I got to the checkout, I ran like crazy back to the produce section for another bunch of celery. I'd need it for both the apple salad and the stuffing and one might not be enough, especially if I decided to make a relish tray.



cynthia haynes

• open season

When I got home, I discovered that I already had a full bunch of celery in the fridge. Well, three's a good number. And two dozen eggs aren't too bad, nor are three full loaves of bread.

Mom had arrived while I was at the store and the turkey sat in a sinkful of cold water. While I unpacked, so did Mom. She handed me a dozen eggs, a bunch of celery and a loaf of bread. She had also baked a ham and brought it — she was afraid we wouldn't have enough to eat.

Now, I have to tell you the family isn't all that big. My sister, my nephew and my mother came from Concordia and my two youngest children from Lawrence. That made seven of us at the table.

That is not a crowd.

A friend told me there were so many people in her parents' home for Thanksgiving she had to eat at the table designated for those age 40 and under.

Luckily, the turkey was small and Mom made deviled eggs out of the dozen she brought. The bread was used up over the next two days as turkey and ham sandwiches were made.

By Sunday afternoon, we finished off the last of the pumpkin pie and the children returned to Lawrence carrying leftover turkey and ham.

We still have a little cranberry sauce and a spoonful or two of green beans left from the holidays. Oh, yes, there are also the three and one-half bunches of celery in the hydrator. It turned out that the stuffing and salad only took part of one bunch.

Steve doesn't know it yet, but he's going to see a lot of celery sticks over the next couple of weeks. You know it's a shame. Everyone prints recipes for leftover turkey, but no one has any for leftover celery.

Clerks can ask for your personal identification

Dear Attorney General Stovall:

I recently purchased some clothes at a local department store.

I was paying by check, and the store clerk asked to see a credit card.

In the past, I have had store clerks ask for other personal information such as my driver's license number or my Social Security number before accepting a check. However, I am hearing more in the news about identity theft, and I am concerned about providing this information.

Attorney General Stovall, what information may a store legally ask for when a customer writes a check?

Dear Kansas Consumer:

There is a section of the Kansas Consumer Protection Act (KCPA) which addresses your question and concerns. It states that a individual or business that is presented a check for payment shall not require, as a condition of acceptance or a means of identification, a credit card number or expiration date unless that credit is issued by the individual or business requesting the information. For example, if you have a credit card with a major department store, the clerk at that department store may record the number of the store's credit card on your check as a condition of acceptance.

The Act does not prohibit the clerk from asking the check-writer to display a credit card as an indication of his or her credit worthiness and financial responsibility or as additional identification, as long as the clerk does not write down the card



carla j. stovall

• consumer corner

number or expiration date. The Act also does not prohibit a clerk from asking for other identifying information such as a driver's license number or Social Security number. My office recommends against disclosing your Social Security number since your driver's license number should be sufficient.

If you are entering into a transaction which requires a security deposit, a clerk may request, receive, and record a credit card number or expiration date in lieu of the security deposit or to assure payment in the event of default, loss, or damage. This is a commonly accepted practice with most automobile rentals and hotels.

Additionally, the Act does not prohibit a clerk from recording a credit card number and expiration date as a condition for cashing a check where that business has agreed with the credit card issuer to cash checks as a service to the issuer's cardholders.

In summary, a supplier may ask to view a credit card as assurance that a check-writer is financially responsible. Generally, the clerk may only record the type of card displayed and the issuer of the credit card. A supplier may record a credit card number:

(1) in lieu of a security deposit, (2) if the business has an arrangement to cash checks as a courtesy for the card issuer's cardholders, or (3) if the credit card was issued by the business requesting it.

While the KCPA provides protection when a consumer is asked to present a credit card when writing a check, there is no requirement that a business must accept a consumer's check as payment for purchases. Many times a business will ask for other types of identification such as a driver's license.

You as a consumer have the choice of whether or not to provide this information, however the business also has the choice of not accepting your check. If you want to keep certain information private, which is your right as a consumer, you must also be prepared to use other methods of payment.

As a consumer in Kansas, it is your right to protect your interests, including the prevention of fraudulent use of your credit card account or other personal information.

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.

When you care enough to write your own

When an elderly neighbor we barely knew died recently, I went to the drug store to buy a sympathy card to send to his wife. I was looking for something sober and simple. A plain white card that said something like, "We were saddened to hear of your loss. Please accept our sincere condolences. Our thoughts are with you at this difficult time."

That you cannot buy. You can, however, buy any number of cards with embossed silver lilies on the front that say, with small variations, "He was the best person on Earth and after he invented cold fusion and time travel he gave all his money to widows and orphans. When he wasn't feeding the homeless he was building them houses. Albert Schweitzer and Mother Theresa wished they were as good and kind as he was. I beg you to make it a closed coffin funeral or I might jump in. Why him, Lord, and not me?"

That was more than I really wanted to say. Maybe someone closer to him, say, the oil delivery guy or septic-tank cleaner, could send something that flowery, but I was practically a stranger. Besides, it was so vague. Like one of those eulogies by a preacher who never met the deceased. I've been to funerals where, after the preacher's finished, I have to look at the program to make sure we're burying the right person.

If that card was too flowery, others were not flowery enough. I didn't have the heart to put my signature on this one either:

"Even though he was in a nursing home for the



jim mullen

• the village idiot

last eight years and hadn't spoken in six, we were shocked. We'd been planning to go see him for years and now it's too late. If only he could have hung on until our kids finished soccer season, we could have been there for him. If you need anything, I mean anything, please let us know. Well, not on Tuesdays, that's Jim's bowling night. And Friday's are pretty bad, too. Sue's taking that Thai cooking class. What's going to happen to that big rollout desk he had? It would really look good in our library. I'm sorry, that was an insensitive thing to say. You might think it will look better in our family room. Who are we to tell you what to do? Thursdays are no good at all. That's 'Survivor' night. We never miss it. Now that I think about it, you're the one with all the free time now. Maybe you should come over here and help us. They say work will take your mind off your troubles."

While looking for something with just the right tone, I accidentally picked up some cards from the "Birthday — Seniors" section. "Hey, you old geezer, drop dead and make room on the planet for someone else," read the first one. "I wanted to get you something extra special, but Dr. Kevorkian is

in jail," said the second. "I gave you this same card last year, but you probably can't remember it, can you, you senile old fool," said the third. I'm starting to think that what carried my neighbor off might have been a torrent of brutal birthday cards.

Sue and I have a big anniversary coming up. We're not telling anyone. I'm not sure I want to open the mail and read, "We found the perfect gift for your 25th Anniversary. His and her silver bullets."

One of the card companies has a slogan, "When you care enough to send the very best." They're right. So I did what I should have done from the start and wrote a note to the new widow on my own stationery. Weeks later she told me it was the only handwritten note she'd received.

Jim Mullen is the author of "It Takes A Village Idiot: A Memoir of Life After the City" (Simon and Schuster, 2001). He also contributes regularly to Entertainment Weekly, where he can be reached at jim_mullen@ew.com

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