

from our viewpoint...

## Need to plug hole in highway program

Congress needs to act, and soon, to plug a gigantic hole in the federal highway aid program.

Without a new law, Kansas alone stands to lose \$120 million in federal aid next year, with disastrous consequences to the state's road program. That's almost one-third of the state's federal money, says Transportation Secretary Deb Miller.

Congress killed an amendment last month that would have plugged the gap with \$8 billion as a rider to a bill allocating money for the Federal Aviation Administration. Few other bills offer a chance to address a transportation issue, and time is running out.

The Federal Highway Trust fund is in trouble for several reasons, not the least of which is the high price of gasoline and diesel fuel. As prices soar, people stop driving as much, and the road fund suffers.

At the same time, the government has been pushing for more fuel efficiency, smaller vehicles and less driving. People are listening this time. The prices today really hurt.

And while the trust fund — like most state road funds — has many sources of income, all are hurting. Plus, the basis of all state and federal highway budgets is the fuel tax.

That's a problem, both because people are using less fuel, and because the tax is calculated by the gallon. If it was a percentage of the price of fuel, the fund might be full.

The problem will only get worse as smaller cars, higher fuel efficiency standards and the pressure to drive less further reduce the tax take. Then there's the problem of "alternative fuel" vehicles.

People who use natural gas, propane or electricity to power their cars don't pay road taxes at all, unless you count the taxes on tires or new trucks. To keep on building highways, the country has to figure out how to tax these vehicles. There's no good solution.

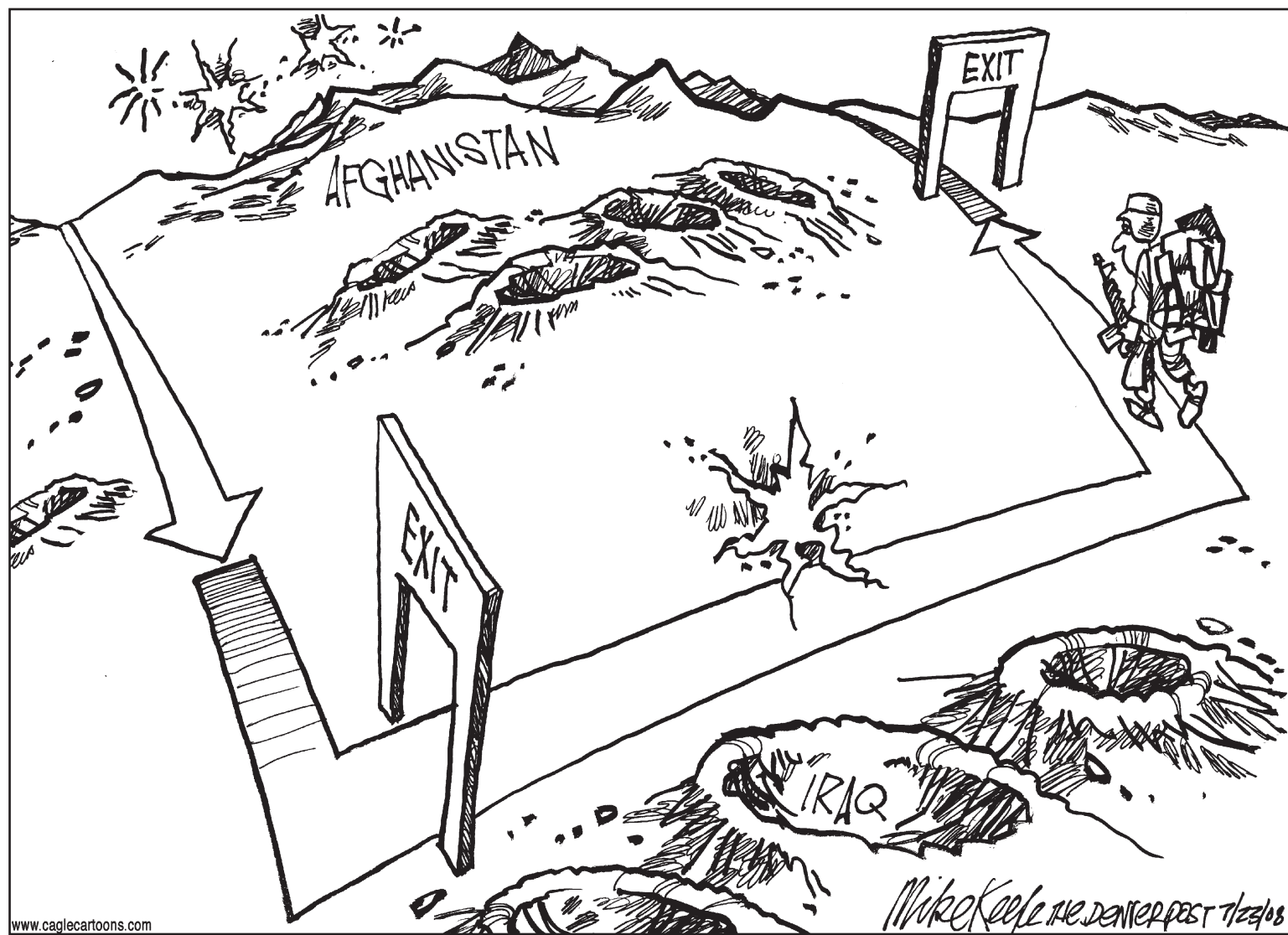
State and federal officials have talked about a "miles driven" tax, which is technically possible. But paying your road tax in one or two yearly lumps would be painful as heck. The current at-the-pump plan is relatively easy to take, at least compared to the cost of fuel.

Congress needs to do something, and chances for a temporary fix are good, since every state would be affected by the shortfall expected next year. A permanent solution is more distant. History says in Washington, nothing will get done until after the deadline.

Meantime, though, action is needed on a patch job by October, and in Washington that's not a long time. Congress pretty much has to gear up for action right after the summer break.

Kansas officials haven't said yet which road projects might be affected by a shortage in the federal fund, and thankfully, most big jobs in this area are done, but the impact across the state could be huge — and long lasting.

The state already faces a crisis finding money to fill its highway fund, and a breakdown in Washington can only make matters worse. — *Steve Haynes*



## Summer and garden growing like crazy

It's summer — glorious, hot, wonderful summer — and the garden is growing like crazy.

My corn really is high as an elephant's eye, and we've already picked several tomatoes.

Out on the fence the snow peas are all gone, but over by the house, the green beans are bearing as fast as their little vines can go.

Every morning I go out to pick beans. It's kind of a hard job, but luckily we only have a small patch.

I start by taking off my shoes. Then I step bare-footed over the two-foot fence that surrounds the patch. I'm not very tall and I have to be careful when I go over the fence. Usually, I lean forward and catch myself on the house.

The bean patch is only about four feet wide and eight feet long, so it doesn't take long to go through it, but it's stoop labor. You find a spot to put your feet among the close-planted beans and lean over to carefully lift each plant and check it for vegetables.

If you find beans, you have to decide if they're ready to pick. If they're too small, you



**cynthia haynes**

• open season

have to hope you'll remember that tomorrow, because if you pass over them one day and miss them on the second day, by the third day they've turned into tough three-foot string beans.

Sharing the auxiliary garden with the beans are the zucchini and broccoli.

My zucchini seeds didn't do well; I only had two plants come up. So I bought some plants and planted more seeds. Did you know that you can support almost a dozen zucchini plants in a four-foot-by-eight-foot area? Well, so far, anyway.

The broccoli is a test. I used to grow broccoli back in Colorado when the children were young. I loved picking my own broccoli and cooking it fresh. However, the broccoli worms,

which die and drop off when it's cooked, kept my children from eating the stuff, so I stopped growing it.

Well, the kids are gone and I've learned that you need to soak the heads in salt water to remove unwanted protein before cooking. I'm ready for that fresh broccoli, which I'm going to have to pick real soon. The zucchini plants are moving in on them.

I've tried to be real careful about zucchini. You know how it is. Ignore a little one, and two days later you don't have vegetables, you have baseball bats. I found and gave away the first two perfect-sized squash. Then I checked the plants again. I found four pick-em-tomorrow and an oversized dark-green zuch hiding under the leaves. It's not a baseball bat — too short — but it's certainly over the hill.

And I thought I was being sooooo careful. Other than that, I should have a green pepper soon and Steve is pulling some lovely garlic. More tomatoes are turning.

It's summertime, and the livin' ain't easy. But it's fun.

## The boilerplate, brilliance of Obama

After writing three major cover stories about Barack Obama's books, his speeches and his tony Chicago neighborhood, Andrew Ferguson of the *Weekly Standard* probably knows as much about Sen. Obama as any conservative writer and reporter can know at this point.

Ferguson's first piece, "The Literary Obama" on Feb. 12, 2007, was a double review of Obama's 1995 memoir "Dreams from My Father," which he found praiseworthy for many artistic and intellectual reasons, and Obama's 200x campaign book "The Audacity of Hope," which Ferguson found stereotypically dull and ruined by its super-cautious politics.

On March 24 of this year Ferguson's examined the "The Timeless Wit & Wisdom of Barack Obama" and found that a lot of his best political phrases sounded, well, very, very familiar. The cover of the latest *Weekly Standard* carries "Mr. Obama's Neighborhood," the results of Ferguson's recent visit to Hyde Park, the unique, upscale Chicago neighborhood Sen. Obama has lived in most of his adult life. I talked to Ferguson recently by phone from his offices in Washington.

Q: Which of your "studies" of Obama's life told you most about his character?

A: First of, it was early on very apparent to me that he was going to be the most interesting candidate that the country had seen in a presidential race in a long time. I always thought he had a chance to win. I had been watching him in that sense for quite a while. By far the most revealing thing about him is the books that he wrote. Anyone who rally wants to understand Obama has to read those books, particularly the first one, which is a straight out memoir that was written — well, I don't know if could say it was written before he was considering running for president, because I think that occurred to him when he was about four, and he's been doing it ever since; but it was written in more of a free-wheeling sort of way than the second book, which has a lot of policy wonkery in it. I think anybody who reads that book will get an excellent sense of who Obama is as a person and how he wants to present himself to people.

Q: What would be the best qualities that shine through?

A: Well, the first thing is intelligence, which is vast, I think. The second is his personal sensitivity, which is almost a romantic sensitivity to his own feelings but also to the feelings and perspectives of other people and he's able to put this in a literary sort of way, which I think is extremely rare in a politician. The gifts of a good politician are totally different from the



**bill steigerwald**

• newsmakers

gifts of a good writer, but he somehow has both. The book is just beautifully written, beautifully paced, and filled with wonderful stories, beautiful characterization. The dialogue is of a kind you'd find in a book by a veteran literary artist. But in between the lines are the things that you need to know about Obama — which is that he deeply, deeply wants to be loved by people. He is given to a kind of rumination that doesn't stop. He's kind of a on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hand kind of guy. I think this is where the charge or suspicion that he is weak comes from, because he is just habitually thinking one side and then other side and never really coming down on one side or the other. That's something that I think will play out in the campaign.

Q: You did a cover piece for the Standard called "The Wit and Wisdom of Barack Obama," which deconstructed Obama's speeches. You said as a speech giver he is getting away with murder and that he is "a master of le baloney."

A: Well, just watching the campaign unfold I was astonished at people going ape over his speeches, as though they were models of originality and insight, when to my ear — and I don't think I'm that old but maybe I am — I just kept hearing the same political clichés I had been hearing for 40 years. So with the aid of Nexis and Google, I went through these speeches and started copying down some of the phrases that had sent college students across the country into a St. Vitas dance, just into a tizzy. Sure enough, nearly every one of them is just boilerplate.

Q: For example would be?

A: "We're going to choose hope over fear." Well, OK, great — who doesn't want to do that? But it just happens to be a phrase that Al Gore used in 2000 and Bill Clinton used in 1992. It probably goes back to Adlai Stevenson or someone. But people would swoon when he'd say these things. Now partly it's because of his incredible personal presence and that beautiful voice that he's got. And he's developed a mannerism that is quite effective in delivering a speech. This is the thing that scared the Founding Fathers — that people could fall in love with the sound of words and never stop to think about the ideas the politics is presenting

are. It's clearly what's happening with Obama.

Q: You said "his speeches were meant to be succumbed to, not thought about."

A: Right. In a way it's kind of emasculating the audience. I think that's a very dangerous thing in a political audience.

Q: You say it's kind of not fair to complain that Obama's speeches are filled with these shopworn phrases because almost every politician has done it since the beginning of time — their recycling the same four phrases. So what's your most damning critique of Obama's oratory?

A: I don't think it should just be placed on him. He's doing what he can get away with. It falls on the audience and the people in the press who treat him as though he's the second coming of Pericles, instead of just mouthing platitudes that should be familiar to anyone who's followed politics for the last 50 years. So I don't really blame him. He's doing the minimum necessary to send the people into the stratosphere.

Q: Have you met Obama?

A: No.

Q: If you had 10 minutes with him, what would be one of the first political questions you'd want to ask him?

A: Oh, boy. I think other people have asked this, but I'd want him to tell me what the most non-liberal position that he advocates is. In other words, show me something outside the mainstream of the Democratic Party that you're really willing to go to the mat for. Of course, he wants to trade on this idea that he's not doctrinaire, that he is thinking outside the dots.

Q: Based on your reporting and thinking about Obama, how does it compare with the sanctified media image of Obama?

A: Well, he's a man of great self-confidence, as anybody is who could do what he's doing — even more so than the average politician. I sometimes worry when I see him in the middle of a basketball arena with 60,000 pouring love on him that he might start to think that this is a perfectly ordinary reaction to his wonderfulness. He needs to know, just as all of his idolaters in the press and his fans in the population need to understand, that he's not that extraordinary; he's not the savior of the American political system.

*Bill Steigerwald is a columnist at the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review. E-mail Bill at steigerwald@caglecartoons.com.*

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e-mail: [star-news@nwkansas.com](mailto:star-news@nwkansas.com)

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N.T. Betz, Director of Internet Services  
([ntbetz@nwkansas.com](mailto:ntbetz@nwkansas.com))

Evan Barnum, Systems Admin. ([support@nwkansas.com](mailto:support@nwkansas.com))

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