

from our viewpoint...

State has no money to fix dangerous road

State officials are focusing on U.S. 50, particularly the stretch from Emporia to Newton, as the state's most dangerous two-lane highway, yet admit they have no money to fix it.

East of Emporia, U.S. 50 runs on I-35, but west of there, it's a two-lane road all the way to the Colorado border. The worst stretch is the 70 miles from Emporia to Newton, which is clogged with big trucks and contributed heavily to the 17 deaths reported on the highway last year.

That stretch was supposed to have been part of the Interstate system, but Kansas officials penciled it out to please the Kansas Turnpike Authority, which feared opening a parallel freeway from Kansas City all the way to Wichita would bankrupt the toll road.

The state Legislature — members of the House and Senate Transportation committees sit on the authority board — made sure no parallel roads were improved enough to compete with the toll road.

Several — including U.S. 24 from Kansas City to Topeka, K-10 from Lawrence to Topeka, U.S. 81 south of Wichita and the deadly stretch of U.S. 50 — were more or less frozen in time. Eventually, traffic west of Emporia became so heavy, the state Department of Transportation rebuilt the road under the latest 10-year transportation plan.

The work did not include any four-lane expressway, however, even though truck traffic has become more and more dense. When U.S. 50 advocates paid for a study of making the road four lanes to Colorado, they avoided that stretch, knowing too well the power of the Turnpike gang.

In the 1950s, blocking U.S. 50 improvements probably made sense. The turnpike represented a big investment to this state. But you have to wonder how many lives have been lost to ensure that turnpike bonds got paid.

Today, U.S. 50 is an overcrowded deathtrap. At last the state seems ready to address the problem, but legislators note it would cost as much as \$1.2 billion to turn the road into a four-lane expressway all the way west.

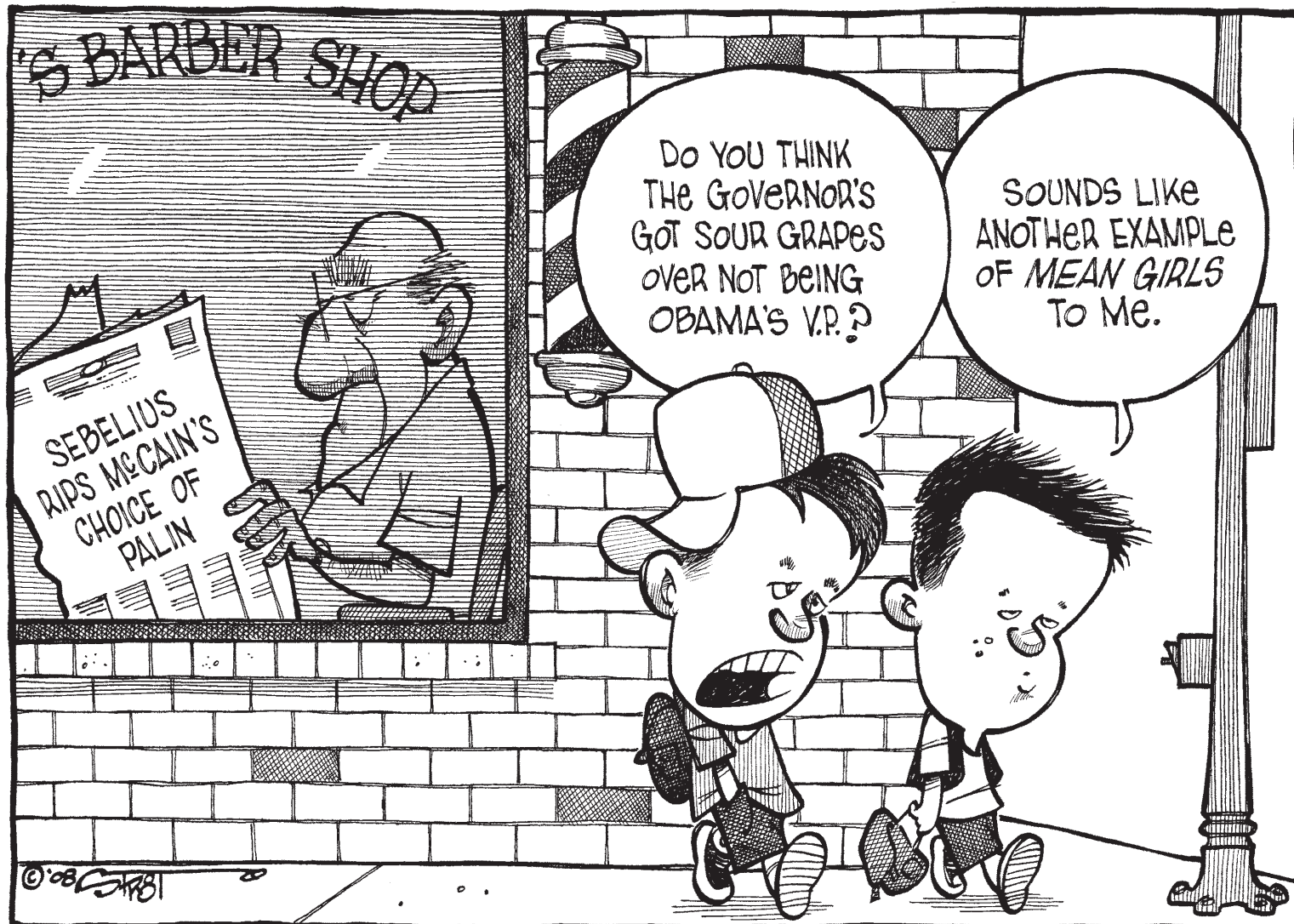
Under the state's upcoming transportation plan, now in the early stages of planning, there's no money for that kind of improvement. Kansas will be lucky to just keep the pavement it has in good repair with the money it expects to have.

Since Gov. Kathleen Sebelius has told her planning committee to avoid a tax increase of any kind, it's not likely there will be any money for U.S. 50 or any other major road improvements.

That despite the fact that everyone — transportation officials, legislators, road users — agrees the money model for transportation is broken. Fuel tax revenue is going down. The government is forcing automakers to improve fuel economy, people are driving less with \$4 gas, and alternative fuels such as natural gas, hydrogen and electricity are not taxed at all.

With traffic expected to double in the next 20 years, Kansas will be left with inadequate roads and a huge bill, with no plans for paying it.

And U.S. 50 will still be overcrowded and deadly. It's some fix to be in. So far, no one has a clue how to solve it. — *Steve Haynes*



School lunch dough

Even Jimmy Schmidt would have gone for a deal like that.

According to MSNBC, the National School Lunch Program is the latest victim of America's rapidly rising food and fuel costs. The cost of subsidized breakfasts and lunches has shot up by as much as 50 percent in some schools.

Despite an \$8.7 billion-plus annual subsidy — despite a 4.3 percent increase in funding this year — the School Nutrition Association wants the government to spend more.

To understand how we got to this point, a little school-lunch history is in order.

During the Depression, FDR saw an opportunity to feed America's poorest kids at the same time he could win the favor of farmers by buying their food with government dough.

In 1946, the Truman administration formalized the government's role. During both World War I and World War II, the government noticed that some recruits suffered from malnutrition and stunted growth. To solve the problem — and win the favor of food producers — the National School Lunch Act was born.

Though there was, and still is, lots of debate and politics surrounding the program, the premise was reasonable enough: For some of America's poorest kids, a hot breakfast or lunch at school might be the only decent meal they have all day.

Which brings us to 2008. The program has expanded a wee bit.

Today, 30.5 million of America's 56 million schoolchildren — roughly 54 percent — participate in the program. Half — children from families at or below 130 percent of the



tom purcell

• commentary

poverty level — receive free lunches. Many others — children at or below 185 percent of the poverty level — are eligible for heavily discounted lunches; they pay 40 cents. Even students from high-income families enjoy a partial subsidy.

If only I could have enjoyed government-subsidized grub at St. Germaine School in the 1970s.

My mother, a master at pinching pennies, packed our lunches. Early in the school year, she was enthusiastic. We never got name-brand treats, but she made a fresh ham sandwich, gave us a fat peach or pear and sometimes mixed baked up some muffins or cookies.

Her enthusiasm waned by the second week of school though. The rest of the year, my lunch consisted of two end pieces of bread and a hunk of bologna glued together by warm mayonnaise. She tossed in some celery, a couple peanut butter crackers and a Washington apple; the apple was littered with multiple half-moon cuts, as my sisters examined every apple with their fingernails before choosing one to eat.

Every day I sat next to Jimmy Schmidt. His lunch consisted of peanut butter and jelly on fresh Wonder Bread, a can of Coke, Hostess Ho Hos and a Nestle Crunch bar — not exactly nu-

tritious, but lunch heaven for a kid back then.

Every day I asked Jimmy if he wanted to trade. He looked at me like I had rocks in my head.

And now, where school lunches are concerned, I think Congress has rocks in its head.

On one hand, the School Nutrition Association people do a tremendous job preparing hot meals for kids. Who can blame them for wanting more government dough to offset rising costs?

But on the other hand, how did taxpayers get into the business of subsidizing the lunches of more than half of America's school kids? Helping out America's poor is one thing, but folks at 185 percent of the poverty level earn up to \$38,000 a year. And though they may not be rolling in the dough, why should other people be expected to feed their kids?

Government subsidies go only one way, however: up.

That is why the Congress that drove up food costs through nutty ethanol subsidies and increased energy costs through nutty energy policies — the Congress whose nutty policies ultimately drove up the cost of school lunches — will probably "resolve" the problem the only way it knows how: make taxpayers fork over even more dough to feed even more kids.

Even Jimmy Schmidt wouldn't turn down a free-lunch deal like that.

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The Grand Old Party line

As he did in Denver, Will Durst was blogging during the Republican National Convention, and here are his final reports to wrap it up for readers:

Pit Bull with Lipstick

Well, now we know why she was nicknamed Sarah Barracuda.

Last night Governor Palin proved that a former small-town mayor from Alaska could hold her own with the former Mayor of New York, Rudolph Giuliani, in the big-time, partisan red-meat sweepstakes, as they headlined a Murderer's Row of GOP speakers who methodically eviscerated the twin scourges of conservatism today: Democratic candidate Barack Obama and the liberal media elite.

In these politically swift-moving waters it should come as no surprise that Palin-Palooza replaced Obama-Rama in the hearts and minds of America. Well, at least on their TV screens. We'll find out about the latter later.

In her almost-but-not-quite acceptance speech, presumptive vice-presidential nominee Palin established herself as a formidable power hitter, gunning for noted hardballer Joe Biden in their upcoming debate.

But in her coming out party, she was as pert as a Meyer Lemon and as easy on the eyes as Key Lime Pie. Like Tina Fey crossed with a shark. Pat Buchanan in heels. Christie Todd Whitman in a skirt. Apparently, being a hockey mom means chewing holes in your opponent's stick. Or as she said; a pitbull with lipstick. Must be all those pucks to the head.

She rallied the crowd into a frothing snarl by disemboweling the irresponsible media for having the audacity to question her experience. Apparently that's sexist and you can't ask her new boss how many houses he owns because he was a POW. Wow. The first off-limits ticket. Nice work if you can get it.

I'll tell you one thing — I'd hate to be John McCain tonight. Think Loudon Wainwright. Having to follow the Rolling Stones.

Party Pooper
Well, that clears things up like a fifty-pound bag of topsoil dumped from a garage roof into



will durst

• raging moderate

a kid's blow-up wading pool on a cantilevered patio.

John McCain, in his hour-long acceptance speech, attempted to convince the country that he isn't just running against the Democrats but against the Republicans as well. It was the weirdest acceptance speech by a candidate for President since Michael Dukakis spoke for 45 minutes and failed to move his neck.

Which was odd, but not as odd as the way the senior senator from Arizona failed to even once mention the current President, George W. Bush, by name. Neither did he mention George H.W. Bush, Jeb Bush, Laura Bush, Babs, the twins or the night-blooming prickly bush thistle. As a matter of fact, there wasn't a single mention of shrubbery, trees, vegetation, or plant-like flora of any kind and precious

little about fauna such as Dick Cheney, Jack Abramoff or any other carnivorous invertebrate.

McCain even warned Washington that change is coming. But this is not your Obama change. This is not new change. This is old change. And he and the Barracuda are just the folks who can change Washington with some of that old change, even though the party they represent has held the White House seven out of the last 10 terms, and Congress 12 out of the last 14 years.

McCain didn't just stand up to his own party; he stood his own party up against the wall and slapped the crap out of them. And they applauded. The biggest surprise is how these clapping Republican Mavericks look exactly like the Republicans who voted in Bush the last two times. Canny of them to adopt such clever disguises.

On an entirely unrelated note: Turns out John McCain was a POW. Who knew?

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