

from our viewpoint...

# Legislature faces unpleasant choices

Kansas legislators face unpleasant choices when they go to work next month.

The state expects a deficit approaching \$147 million this year, with the number likely to top \$1 billion in the next fiscal year when it ends June 30, 2010.

That's without drastic cuts, of course, but the state Constitution does not allow the government to run a deficit. The so-called "cash basis" law requires the state to end the year in the black.

The last time this happened, the Legislature "solved" the problem mostly with smoke and mirrors. It shifted funds, changed tax-payment dates and shuffled things around. The result was a one-time wonder, a budget that at least looked balanced.

Those tricks can't likely be repeated, though. That leaves the incoming Legislature with the task of actually cutting spending. And we are not talking this time about cutting spending requests by state departments, as leaders in Topeka so often do.

The figures put out by state budget analysts require cuts from what the state will actually spend this year, and next.

What to cut. There are no easy choices.

Public education takes up about half the budget. The governor and many legislators have pledged not to cut education. It's popular, and they remember when they held school spending down last time, school boards sued for their "rightful" share of the budget.

State courts, ever mindful of increasing their power and diminishing the Legislature's, ruled the schools deserved more money. The justices cited a study paid for by the Legislature to justify their order.

Cutting schools won't go far, except maybe as a last resort. If other programs all get cut, the schools might take a small hit.

Next up in size and threat to the budget are the so-called entitlements, welfare and medical programs which use a lot of federal money and come under federal rules. It's tough for the state to cut Medicaid payments to the poor and elderly, even at a time of dire need.

And the feds might penalize the state for any cuts that run afoul of their rules.

Which leaves everything else. Transportation and higher education are the next-biggest pieces of the pie. Both are important parts of what the state does, and both face ever-increasing demands for money.

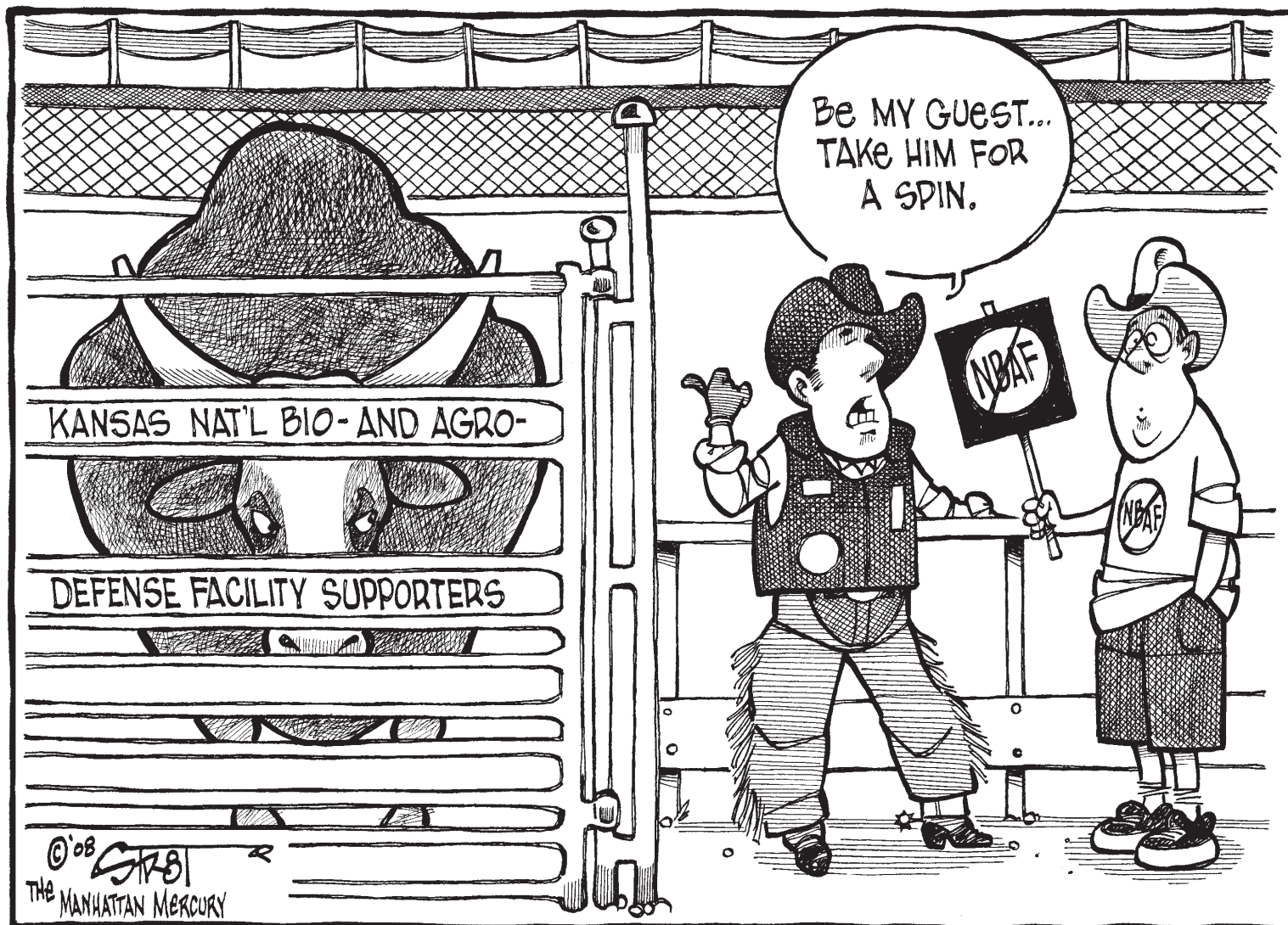
While transportation has its own "trust fund," it gets general tax money from the state as well. With the motor fuels tax increasingly less dependable, as fuel mileage declines and use of "alternative" fuels increases, the "gas tax" brings in less and less. That's one reason transportation needs injections of sales tax money.

Colleges already have been cut to the point where they get only about 25 percent of their money from the state. A recent program to fix up buildings has addressed the worst issues of "deferred maintenance" on campus, but universities and smaller schools still need money.

A lot of "minor" state programs will feel the knife, some the ax. And cuts may still be required for the big boys, schools, colleges, roads and "entitlements."

Nobody in their right minds would take this job on. We're not sure what that says about our legislators, but they do have some tough decisions to make.

Like all the rest of us, though, the state of Kansas will survive this downturn and live to face another. — Steve Haynes



# Change is changing



**michael reagan**

• making sense

A funny thing happened on his way to the White House: that old, left-wing community organizer Barack Obama has suddenly veered toward the center, and his incoming administration is looking more and more like the Daley Machine in Chicago than Hugo Chavez's administration down in Venezuela.

It seems that reality has set in, instructing the soon-to-be president-elect (he won't be that until the presidential electors gather and vote for him this month) that it's easier to promise change than it is to change the way things are traditionally done in a democracy.

Watching him announce key appointments to cabinet and sub-cabinet posts makes one think this is Bill Clinton redux. Mr. Obama has dug deep into the 1990s and resurrected much of the Clinton cast of characters, even to naming Hillary Clinton to be secretary of state.

That appointment, some have suggested, is Obama's way of emulating Lyndon Johnson. When LBJ named an old foe to a post in his administration, he explained it was better to have the camel inside the tent urinating out, than outside the tent urinating in.

None of this satisfies the radical left that went bonkers trying to elect the man they thought would turn the White House into a new Kremlin and name all of them commissars of the new Socialist Republic of America.

Barack Obama, ardent disciple of the late Saul Alinsky, seems to have forgotten the iron-clad left-wing dictate — "no enemies to the left." With every Clintonite or Wall Streeter appointment he makes a new enemy on the left.

What the Alinsky/Ayers crowd doesn't seem to understand is that Barack Obama's only acquaintanceship with government in action was his close relationship with Chicago's Daley machine, where its hallmark — aside from its rampant corruption — was devotion to pragmatism. If it works, do it; if it doesn't, don't.

Everything Mr. Obama has done in recent weeks since winning the election has been an exercise in pragmatism — gone is all the heated rhetoric about change and reform. Everything is now measured by only one standard — it must above all be practical.

What his disappointed leftist allies don't grasp is that many of those who voted for him thought he had a conservative message for them. Now with his appointments such as keeping Robert Gates at the Defense Department and naming Paul Volcker as a top economic advisor, he's delivering on what the voters saw as his conservative promises.

Unlike Bill Clinton, he's moving to the center before he takes office, and not two years afterwards as Clinton did. During the campaign I prayed he was lying when he unveiled his platform and promises of what he'd do as president.

I was hoping he lied about taxes. I was hop-

ing he lied about ending the war in Iraq in 16 months. I was hoping he lied about all of those nutty left-wing programs he was promising.

It looks as if my prayers were answered.

I expect that he'll try to mollify his now-dejected left-wing supporters by tossing them a few bones. He'll push for the horrendous "Freedom of Choice" bill that would enshrine abortion as the supreme law of the land, overturning all restrictions on the grisly procedure previously enacted by the states; and trying to gag conservative talk radio hosts, for example.

I'm sure he knows that those attempts might be empty gestures if his party falls short of the 60 votes in the Senate they need to shut off debate on such measures, thereby allowing the Republican minority to use the filibusters to kill such measures so dear to the hearts of the so-called progressives.

What's happening is Obama's discovery that there is a big difference between running for president and being president. He is now up to date, up to speed, and getting all the information George Bush is getting — and he having to make decisions based on that information.

As a result he and George Bush are now on the same wavelength. It's amazing what a little dose of reality will do to a man who dreamt dreams before he encountered the inescapable facts of life.

Welcome to Washington, Barack Obama.

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# Economics through a looking glass



**martha r. carr**

• commentary

There are a lot of great thinkers who are putting their heads together right now trying to figure out how to get the economy going again. Many of them have put forward ideas that the federal government has gone ahead and tried but without success. At times, the news has gone in the opposite direction as if in direct defiance of a billion dollar bailout or an interest rate drop hovering near zero.

Henry Paulson, the Secretary of the Treasury, has had egg on his face more than once recently from declaring he had figured out some aspect of this mess only to watch it fail as yet another giant corporation screams for help. Last week it was Citigroup, which has been designated another too-big-to-fail along with AIG and General Motors. How ironic that the proposed white knight for Wachovia just one month ago is now teetering on disaster.

That news also begs the question of just how many corporations can't go under in a free market society. How many more are trying to time their SOS so that they are rescued, like AIG and can go on a government-paid holiday, and not abandoned like Lehman who had to go home? And, as the ideas du jour fail and consumer confidence continues to flag it becomes more likely that we're making promises we can't keep which will only hurt more as consumers become even more reticent to spend. That would be a perfect example of a vicious cycle.

Apparently, the mistake small business owners made who are facing the same credit crunch was to not be big enough. If only they had made the same reckless deals to gobble up unrelated businesses or traded in unregulated derivatives and had grown at a feverish pitch they might be in line for a big fat check as well. Oh well, hindsight.

There is a reason why humanity is often compelled to repeat the past and its part of why we're driving straight into a cycle that's already showing signs of failing miserably. It's because we don't like not knowing the outcome of anything. That's why our econo-

mists are constantly digging around past trends looking for similarities that might be put to good use in current situations.

However, the aspect of human beings that really separates us from any other living creature is our propensity for choosing something in the face of all logic. It's why five-inch heels that make a woman stand around on her tiptoes are in vogue or why a cup holder in a car was designed to hold a soda big enough to push Americans into obesity.

The only way out of any well-oiled cycle is for one side to change their behavior. In the past, consumers were happy to oblige and spend money they didn't really own but that gag isn't working anymore. Perhaps it's time for us to stop rewarding bad behavior and dis-

assemble the conglomerate behavior.

There has been so much worship at the feet of bigger-is-better that we may be overlooking a solution. Unravel the businesses. Allow the segments that are failing to fail. Set loose the parts that are still viable, which means the parts that consumers still want. That creates the vacuum that will be filled by new products, new ideas. It's painful in the short term but reaps the greater benefits in the longer run.

The alternative is propping up obese corporations that are mismanaged and producing consumer goods that have fallen out of favor in a society that proposes to be democratic. The consequence that follows is that new solutions, new businesses find it harder to be seen or heard and more money is wasted. Allowing failure is the only way we can cultivate success, otherwise we will have to accept that we're creating a society without free enterprise. That's a very slippery slope.

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## The Goodland Star-News

(USPS No. 222-460. ISSN 0893-0562)

Member: Kansas Press Association  
Inland Press Association Colorado Press Association  
National Newspaper Association

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Published every Tuesday and Friday except the days observed for New Year's Day, July 4th and Christmas Day, at 1205 Main Ave., Goodland, Kan. 67735.

Periodicals postage paid at Goodland, Kan. 67735; entered at the Goodland, Kan., Post Office under the Act of Congress of March 8, 1878.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Goodland Star-News, 1205 Main Ave., Goodland, Kan. 67735.

TELEPHONE: (785) 899-2338. Editorial e-mail: [star-news@nwkanssas.com](mailto:star-news@nwkanssas.com).

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SUBSCRIPTIONS: In Sherman County and adjacent counties: three months, \$29; six months, \$46; 12 months, \$81. Out of area, weekly mailing of two issues: three months, \$39; six months, \$54; 12 months, \$89 (All tax included). Mailed individually each day: (call for a price).

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