

from our viewpoint...

Commissioners face budget struggle

For four hours on Friday the Sherman County commissioners poured over the budget figures for next year, trying to find ways to hold down the property tax levy.

Counties do not have a lot of options for funding services to take care of the roads, sheriff, health, courthouse and various offices within the courthouse. In fact the major funding for all county operations comes through the property taxes paid by the citizens.

The county and city do get money from the combined one cent sales tax and the county receives additional money from the special one-quarter cent health services sales tax.

An additional one cent sales tax is paying for the special road work done recently in the city and county. The current chip sealing of old U.S. 24 is being partially paid for out of the special road sales tax.

In the past few weeks the county commissioners have been going through each department budget looking for ways to trim and to question the things that are being done by each department on an annual basis.

The “special interest” groups came in for their share of the pinch, and Commissioner Cynthia Strnad said Friday she expects there to be more cuts in these when the county does the budget next year.

Commissioner Chuck Thomas summed up the effort after four hours saying he felt the commissioners had been shuffling numbers, but not getting anywhere.

Strnad said she felt the changes were giving the county a more realistic view of how money is being spent.

Thomas said there will be no salary increases for the next year, and the county is looking at a 3 percent increase in costs for employee benefits.

He said he hopes the public will understand why the county needs to have carryovers each year.

“We got caught this year because we did not have the carryovers,” he said.

The commissioners did cut the total budget by about \$700,000, but without the carryovers the property tax levy may increase by about 13 mills.

The neighborhood revitalization program will take a hit because the three commissioners feel it is a bigger expense to the county than the benefit. The county recently passed a resolution to renew this program for another three years, but decided Friday to rescind their resolution to cut the program off at the end of this year.

Strnad said she feels it is an expense of about \$40,000 the county cannot afford, and feels people building homes should be able to pay the property taxes.

The program has been in existence for more than five years, and more than 90 people have taken advantage of the program for business expansion, remodeling, new homes and other buildings throughout the county.

The program was patterned after successful programs in other counties around Kansas, and the Sherman County Economic Development Council spent more than two years putting the program together. The council wanted to create incentives for businesses who wanted to come to the county or existing businesses who wanted to expand. To be fair to everyone the council set up a rebate program that was available to both businesses and homeowners.

One can understand how it may look like an expense to the county having to rebate \$40,000 to taxpayers, but the program has been a successful incentive to help people invest in Sherman County.

Losing this program is an unfortunate result of the need to pinch pennies. — *Tom Betz*

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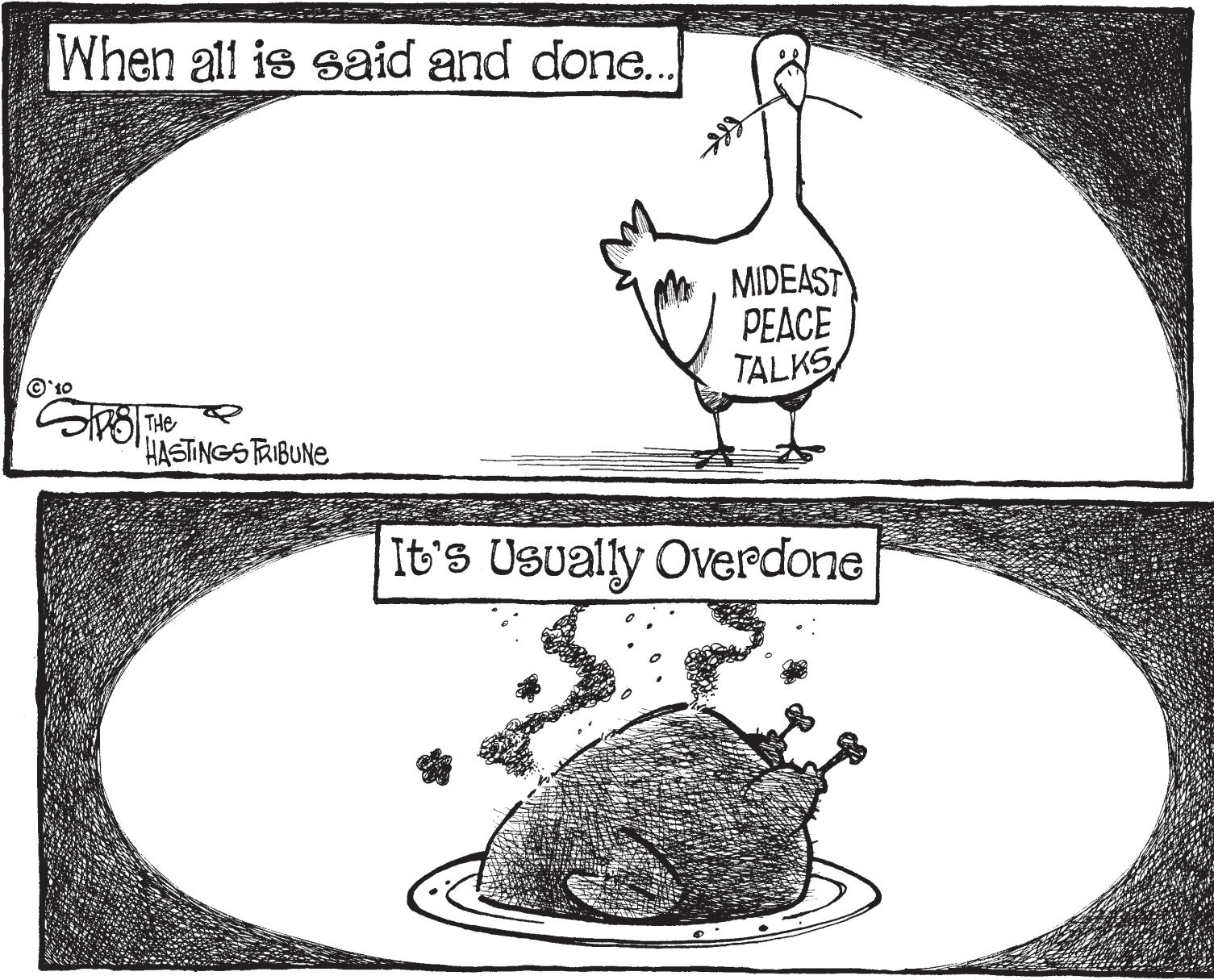
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I got to tickle an alligator’s tummy

I held an alligator and even got to tickle his tummy last week during a visit to Colorado Gators, a fish farm and wildlife preserve.

The San Luis Valley of Colorado, which competes with northern Minnesota for the lowest temperatures in the winter, seems a strange place for an alligator preserve, but there it is, sitting above a series of geothermal wells. When the snow is on the ground, the water is nice and warm □ sort of a very large hot tub for reptiles, amphibians and fish.

The farm started in 1974 when a family from Texas bought land with a plan to grow tilapia, a kind of African perch that requires warm water.

The fish did well, but there was all the leftovers after they were filleted and sent off to restaurants and fish markets of Denver. In 1987, someone got the bright idea of feeding the leftovers to alligators, so 100 baby gators were purchased from Florida.

The gators loved the leftovers and thrived in the 87-degree waters.

In 1990, the farm opened its doors to the public and became not only a working fish farm but a regional tourists attraction. Soon, it became a sanctuary for unwanted exotic pets of all types, as people started sending their oversized and overaged snakes, lizards and alligators there because the farm refuses to kill any of its exotic friends.

I’ve known about the wonderland of reptiles for many years and have hoped to visit, but with this and that and the other, the chance has just never come up.

This year, I vowed, would be my time. I



cynthia haynes

- open season



tained boas up to 250 pounds and over 16 feet long, many of them former pets (and illegal in Oberlin, by the way). That’s one big snake. Actually, the farm has about 15 big snakes, although they weren’t all quite that big. There are also a few crocodiles.

Smaller aquariums held corn snakes, gopher snakes, rattlesnakes and lizards of all kinds.

Outside were ponds and ponds of alligators: big ones, bigger ones and humongous ones, including Morris, which has appeared on the Tonight Show and has starred in several movies, including Happy Gilmore and Dr. Doolittle 2.

I was in reptile heaven. I wandered all over the place, and when Steve arrived, we had our official picture taken with a small gator. Steve took my picture with the little fellow and petting several tortoises, which have the run of the place, although there are two-foot fences every so often to keep them in separate areas.

These land turtles weigh in at 60 to 125 pounds, we were told. One went on a tear, knocking one of his smaller buddies over, then wedging himself in the ladies room. His keeper looked like she might spank him.

Visitors get a “certificate of bravery” for holding a gator. They seal it by having the gator chomp down on it, but if you ask me, he looked like he was tired of paper. So watch your hands.

It was a great trip. Maybe next year I can pet some of the snakes, but not the rattlers. Boas don’t bite, do they?

Common sense about food safety

There is anxiety about food safety in our country today. The most recent example is the half-billion egg recall. As a result, people are worried about the safety of the eggs they eat.

While some food safety problems occur on the farm, many more occur in the kitchen where food can be mishandled or poorly prepared. Keeping food safe is everyone’s business. Yours and mine.

The way we handle, store and cook food can mean the difference between a satisfying meal and a bout with E. coli or salmonella. Keeping food safe requires a few tried and true steps. Keep food clean, keep it separate, cook it completely and always chill it.

When shopping, keep eggs and raw meat items separate in your grocery cart from foods that do not need to be cooked. Avoid cross contamination.

To prevent raw meat and poultry from contaminating foods that will be eaten without further cooking, enclose individual packages of raw meat or poultry in plastic bags. Position packages of raw meat or poultry in your shopping cart so their juices cannot drip on other food.



Insight this week

- john schlageck

Cook your eggs to at least at 160 degrees Fahrenheit. This is where the egg yolk is firm. Eliminate recipes that use raw eggs such as meringues that are whipped up from raw egg whites and folded into mousses or pies for example. Pre-pasteurized egg whites are options for these recipes. Completely cooked is completely safe.

Fruits and vegetables should be washed well, but washing may not remove all contamination. Keep a separate cutting board for raw meats and another for food preparation that does not require cooking such as salads. Again, this simple step helps avoid cross contamination.

Keep food chilled. Meat, lettuce and eggs should be stored in a refrigerator that is between 33 and 40 degrees Fahrenheit. Keep eggs in the original container in the main body of refrigerator, not in the egg carrier in the door.

Minimize the time in and out of your refrigerator. It is difficult to keep the temperature constant, especially if you have a family that continuously opens the door.

Never leave cooked eggs or other perishable food products sitting out on the counter. Put them in the refrigerator once you’ve served them. The rule is if perishable food is left two hours at room temperature, it should be discarded.

While most of these tips sound simple, a common-sense approach the next time you shop and cook could ensure safer food for your family.

John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau has been writing about farming and ranching in Kansas for more than 25 years. He is the managing editor of “Kansas Living,” a quarterly magazine dedicated to agriculture and rural life in Kansas.