

from our viewpoint...

## ‘Creative’ financing creates school mess

The mess created by the Kansas Legislature’s “creative” financing of schools last year ought to teach us a lesson. We probably won’t learn, but we should.

The Legislature, you remember, “found” money to balance the budget in 2003 by advancing the collection date for property taxes a month. That meant we had to pay the second half of our taxes in May rather than June.

That was no big deal for cities and counties, which run on a calendar year. Their income was the same, and they got the money a little earlier.

For the state, though, it meant moving the second-half collection into the old fiscal year. The effect was a one-time shot in the arm for the state budget, created by accounting magic and nothing more.

Schools got a little money out of that, but local school districts were not allowed to take the windfall. Only the state got the benefit.

School districts were supposed to lower their property tax levy last year and raise it some this year to avoid getting any extra money. Of course, superintendents did everything they could to keep a little of the money. That’s only natural.

Now, the state is stuck with the change. There’s no way to put tax collections back to June where they belong. There’s no extra money this year for schools. There is no way to tap that well again.

While state revenues are improving, there is a lot of pent up demand. The Legislature is going to be under pressure to raise taxes to pay for any number of programs: schools, universities, prisons, social service, you name it.

Times are not that good, though. The voters were in a conservative mood this summer, casting out liberal members of the Legislature and the state Board of Education.

Our prediction: There’ll be no general tax increase, because people don’t think they can afford one.

Spending fans won’t like that conclusion, but here’s to say it’ll come true.

People seem to want to keep a lid on state spending. There are lots of pressure groups, mostly those who benefit from state programs, schools and the like. They don’t, apparently have the votes to elect many legislators.

So this year, the Legislature will have to chop and trim and fit spending into revenue estimates. Members will need to be firm.

And we hope they have learned one lesson, if nothing else: Be real.

Accounting tricks always come back to haunt you. They don’t create money, just problems.

Solve the budget problems the way it should be done: Allocate money where it’s important, to schools, colleges, highways and vital programs. Eliminate waste. Cut spending until the budget fits.

And leave the smoke and mirrors alone. — *Steve Haynes*



## Some stories are too long for one sitting

I don’t know about you, but some of my stories are too long to tell in one sitting.

Here is the second installment of my hunt for a new notebook computer.

When I suppressed my irritation over not being able to buy the computer special I wanted, I went back into the store to confirm it with a manager.

I stopped one of the “more mature-looking” teenagers (with an ID badge indicating she was an assistant manger), and asked why I couldn’t get the special if I paid for it today.

Guess what! I got a different answer! This answer was that I could get the package special, but the computer department would have to order it.

So I went back to the computer teen and told him. He excused himself to go talk to the manager. In a few minutes, he returned with “new information that was different than he’d been told earlier that morning.” I could order the missing pieces and pick them up later. I told him that’s what I wanted to do. He stepped to a computer and ordered it — to be delivered to the store. (That took about 45 seconds.) Then, excusing himself again, he went to gather up the other three pieces of the “package.”

He found the carrying case (which I noticed wasn’t made the same as the picture in the paper but figured it was an okay substitute). Then he showed up a little later with the printer in a shopping cart. “I’ll go get the computer in the back room.” He disappeared. Eventually he



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• commentary

came back with: “All the ones in the back room are saved for other customers.” He evidently didn’t remember he’d told me all the specials had been sold already. Somehow I sensed that sales people don’t always tell the truth — or maybe just don’t have a clue. I was not very happy, but didn’t say anything.

He went to order the computer, too. It would be delivered to my home.

He took the cart and me over to the “Customer Service” to check out.

Wouldn’t you know? I get a trainee cashier. While she is ringing things up, I again study the ad. When she gives me a total, I said, “Let me see your cash register tape.” She said, “I can’t show it until the cash register spits it out. The machine won’t let me.”

“Well, something is wrong. The ad says it will be this much (I pointed to the figure in the ad) plus tax after the ‘instant’ rebates. Where do I get the instant rebates?”

She calls over a supervisor (also very young). They study awhile, and compare item numbers. Guess what! The computer carrying case isn’t the right one, so all the items rang up individually instead of the on-sale “package” price. And

because every item wasn’t the exact product number, I didn’t get one of the mail-in rebates (\$250) either. Of course, I objected.

They call over the “sales boy” who helped me. “Well, we were out of the regular case.” So he had to order the correct one. The clerk canceled the first purchase and started again. But at least then, I got the instant rebates and the correct number of mail-in forms.

By now, I have been in the store for almost an hour and a half. I had a lot of time to reminiscence about how easy shopping used to be. Of course, we had fewer choices, but I’m not convinced that was a bad thing.

Today, I’m still contemplating my computer purchase. So far, I have a new printer (which I didn’t need at all). I have to go back to the store in a few days to pick up the carrying case and extra memory. The computer is supposed to be mailed to my home. Then of course, I’ll have to take the computer in to have the extra memory installed.

That will mean I have four round trips of 60 miles to purchase a computer. I guess I’ll just ignore that, and not add it to the cost. But then, given gas prices, maybe I will.

Assuming that all components arrive as predicted, and assuming the store stands behind their ad better than they have so far, I guess eventually I will have a new laptop (excuse me, “notebook”). I think I’m happy about it, but I’m really not sure. I haven’t even begun the process of reading the enormous User Guides yet!

## Always ‘be prepared’ when mountain hiking

It was the last day of our Colorado vacation and Steve was determined to get up to Phoenix Park. We had been taking walks most every day.

We had walked on the roads around the area, up the slight incline of the Forest Service trail on the other side of the river and up a steeper, but not too difficult trail, several miles away.

The one thing all those hikes had in common was they lasted no more than an hour from hopping out of the car to hopping back in.

Phoenix Park would be longer and steeper.

We hadn’t hiked up that trail in several years. Now it was time to try it again.

We grabbed our pack, which contains waterproof matches, slickers, a mirror and a Forest Service map. We added lunch, water and our books.

We would walk up to the park, picnic, read for awhile and walk back.



cynthia  
haynes

• open season

The trail is steep, rocky and crosses several creeks. It took us an hour to go the four miles up to the park. On the way up we met some hikers from Texas. They said they had gone up to the 10-mile marker but were returning before the weather set in.

Well, yes, there were clouds forming over the mountains. But then again, clouds form over the mountains every day. We had our pack. We hoped we were prepared.

By the time we reached the park, we both wished that we hadn’t chosen to wear shorts and T shirts. However, we had brought long-sleeved shirts as backups and soon put them on.

We picnicked in a grove of trees that gave us some protection from the wind but didn’t bother to get out the books. As soon as the last bite of sandwich was devoured and the last bit of trash stowed, we started back down.

It usually takes about the same amount of time to go down the mountain as up — in this case it was an hour’s trip up.

However, we found that we went considerably faster downhill as the rain started to fall. It never got heavy enough to break out the slickers, which tend to be smelly and uncomfortable. But, it gave us a sense of urgency we don’t usually have.

It was the kind of storm that you hear about in the mountains. The kind of storm that drops a foot of snow on unprepared, short-and-T-shirt-wearing hikers.

We made it down the mountain in a little under 50 minutes and back to town before the rain started in earnest.

It never did snow, although later we found that the forecast called for possible flurries.

The next morning we found frost on the truck and ice on the dog’s water bowl.

My mother warned me about Colorado when she studied copies of the newspaper we were planning to buy.

“You don’t want to move there,” she said pointing to the weather column. “It freezes in July and August.”

Mother always did know best.

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