

from our viewpoint...

More money won't fix problems

In Topeka, everyone is set to throw another \$400 million into education to satisfy the Supreme Court, which is running the show.

Absolutely no one knows where the money will come from.

The state's economy is growing, but only at about half the national pace. It might produce that kind of money over a couple of years.

Or it might not.

Right now, the only way to get the money would be to raise taxes. In an election year, that's not likely.

Meantime, colleges languish as tuition soars.

Tougher new drug laws will send thousands more to prisons already full of minor drug offenders. And we'll need to build more prisons.

A legislative report outlines how much the state will have to spend to boost school performance and meet the federal "No Child Left Behind" goals — up to \$400 million a year.

While the courts demand action, they're silent on where the money should come from.

Funny thing, though. Kansas schools are, by all accounts, doing quite well. Test scores are high. Most students graduate.

What is the problem?

Imbalance between districts rich and poor, big and small. The have-nots are never willing to let this dog lie.

However the current fight is settled, it seems certain that the dispute will go on for years. It has been going on, in fact, nearly since the state took over school finance forty-some years ago.

None of the goals, desires, suggestions and mandates in the Legislative Post Audit report is a bad idea, in and of itself.

The question we ought to be asking, along with "what do schools need," is "what can Kansas afford?"

Like any family or business, the state has only so much money. It has many needs, and schools are just one of them.

Like any family or business, the state needs to make some decisions about what to spend money on, what to put off and what it just can't afford.

It's the Legislature that must do that, not the courts.

Maybe we can't afford a "perfect" education system, not when highways, prisons, colleges and parks go wanting.

It's going to be an interesting year. — *Steve Haynes*

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The border is vital to GOP center

Republicans have one of the trickiest political problems they have faced since Clinton preempted their program through triangulation and left them temporarily devoid of issues.

As the number of illegal immigrants mounts in the United States, the demands of the party's natives constituency for tighter border controls and immigration enforcement threaten to put it at odds with America's rapidly growing Hispanic population, dooming the GOP to possible minority status not just in California and New York but in Texas and Florida as well.

The push-pull between Hispanic demands for respect and natives concerns about job loss, crime, education costs and urban crowding, all exacerbated by illegal immigration, poses a huge problem for party leaders.

The obvious answer to demands for limits on immigration is the border fence plan passed by the House and pending in the Senate. Slated to extend over 700 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border at a cost upwards of \$2 billion, the barrier, coupled with increased enforcement manpower and employer sanctions, will likely give the United States a means to control population inflows. But what of the economic, moral, foreign-policy and political issues a fence will raise?

Mexican illegal immigrants are not coming here in search of welfare, but work. That they find it is obvious. Otherwise how could they send \$11 billion a year home to their families and why would they come in increasing numbers?

Clearly, the American economy needs their services. On a micro-economic level, they do jobs Americans don't want at wages below what we would consider acceptable — and perhaps below those that are legal as well. On a macro level, their presence holds down labor



dick morris

• commentary

costs and permits the Federal Reserve to take more chances with low interest rates than it could in an inflationary wage market.

The obvious answer to these concerns is a grand bargain that couples the strictest border defense with a generous guest-worker program, granting legal status to Mexican immigrants and regulating their numbers, working conditions, and wages — and assuring they contribute to Social Security and other taxes.

The foreign-policy implications of a fence are harder to handle. Already Latin resentment against the United States is fueling the rise of an oil- and cocaine-based leftist oligarchy throughout our hemisphere. Castro now has friends in power in Venezuela and Bolivia and moderate allies in Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina. In Peru, a leftist Chavez look-alike, Ollanta Humala, is leading in the presidential race. In Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega may be heading back to power by a gradual military coup. And in Mexico itself, a Chavez protégé, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, is leading in the polls for the July 2006 presidential race. Can you imagine having a border with a Chavez or a Castro, whose ability to disregard American concerns would be underscored by massive oil reserves?

But it is in the realm of domestic politics that the GOP would pay the highest price for a purely natives policy. Texas has now become

a majority-minority state, joining California. Can its wholesale flip to the Democratic Party be far behind? Not if the Republicans are seen as an anti-Hispanic party! Is the GOP really willing to make political war against the Latinos by rubbing their noses in a border fence when they now account for 14 percent of the population and will probably increase to 18 percent over the next 10 years?

The permanent political price the Republican Party would pay for this shortsightedness is reminiscent of the way it antagonized the African-American vote in the '60s. Remember that Dwight Eisenhower carried blacks in 1952 and 1956. John F. Kennedy only narrowly prevailed in the black community. It was not until Barry Goldwater and Richard Nixon, pursuing the Southern strategy at all costs, drove blacks into the arms of the Democrats that their votes were irretrievably lost. Is the GOP, driven by the anger of its base, going to make Hispanics permanent Democrats?

By moving away from English-only policies and reaching out to Hispanics, Bush has closed the gap among Latino voters. Gore carried them by 30 points, but Kerry only won among them by 10. But the border backlash may be undoing all this good work.

The obvious answer is to couple a fence with a good guest-worker program, including a citizenship track predicated on good behavior. But if the Republican Party allows the House bill to become law — a fence with no guest-worker program — it will be antagonize the vital Latino vote and consign itself to permanent minority status.

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Kansas debt: It's bigger than you think

To the Editor:

It is widely reported that the average credit card debt by Americans is over \$8,000. Did this bill become so large because every person with a credit card rushed out to get the largest plasma television they could buy? No. This debt built up over time with a dinner here, a tank of gas there and before long.... Well, most people reading this know the sad (and expensive) end of that story.

What hasn't been so widely reported is what has happened to the Kansas credit card in Topeka that Republican and Democratic governors and legislators have been "maxing out" in the name of fiscal responsibility. On Tuesday, the Senate Transportation committee unanimously voted to recommend approval of \$150 million in new Kansas debt to build highways. In December, the Legislative Coordinating Council recommended \$60 million in new debt to finance the complete \$210 million transportation funding package.

To paraphrase one keen student of the legislative process, \$60 million here, \$150 million there and before long, you're talking about real money! Approximately \$4 billion, yes billion, of real money.

The Kansas Constitution requires Kansas citizens to vote on the Legislature authorizing



from our readers

• to the editor

more than \$1 million in general obligation debt. Legislators and governors have sidestepped this pesky requirement by simply classifying the bonds as revenue bonds instead of general obligation bonds. A minor detail of the Kansas Constitution isn't going to stop members of either party when they really have the urge to pull out their Kansas credit card.

Proponents of the increased debt argue that most states are turning to revenue bond financing, so Kansas isn't unusual in this regard. Yet from 1992 to 2004, 20 states actually decreased their debt as a percent of personal income. In Kansas, during the same time period, our debt as a percent of personal income rose the second highest in the nation, a 560 percent increase.

Kansas hasn't always had such high levels of debt. In 1992, Kansas total debt was \$424 million. Since then, the total debt has increased a staggering 832 percent. To put this into perspective: In 1992, the entire Kansas debt was

\$424 million. In 2005, just our debt service, the payment of principal and interest, will be \$429 million. That's right, principal and interest alone will be higher than our entire debt just over a decade ago.

So taxpayers and fiscally responsible legislators should be on notice. Despite the calls by an unelected judiciary to spend hundreds of millions more on education, the Kansas credit card is maxed out. It is time to resist the temptation to increase taxes on an already tax-burdened and lagging Kansas economy. It is time to make the tough choices that voters expect. If that constitutional responsibility is shirked once again, the voters of Kansas may finally take back their right to make these decisions for themselves.

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