

from our viewpoint...

Green flag given to sales tax plan

The stars must have been aligned perfectly last week, as the Legislature sliced through the normal red tape and passed a Sherman County request to ask citizens for a one-cent sales tax to fix city streets and county roads.

Our legislators, Rep. Jim Morrison and Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer, deserve a high five for their efforts to convince their respective houses that the sales tax is an important part of development efforts for northwest Kansas.

Once Gov. Kathleen Sebelius signs the law, the Goodland City Commission and the Sherman County commissioners can turn to the citizens for their approval of the joint road-improvement plan.

Estimates are that a special election on the sales tax will be held in the middle of April, and that could get the road projects moving quickly.

Some in the Legislature were under the impression that the push for the sales tax was to build roads for the Goodland Energy Center, but the joint road project was being discussed months before plans for the new industrial park were announced. Having the impetus of the new development and the increased sales from the developments will help the city and county reach the goals of improving the streets and roads, though.

No one likes increasing taxes, but when the city commission and county commissioners met in May to discuss the road project, both boards agreed a sales tax was the best way to pay for the estimated \$11 million in street and road repairs.

Changing the state law allows county citizens to decide whether this is how they want to use their money. Seven years ago, when the county asked the state for permission to pass a sales tax to fix old U.S. 24, the Legislature and governor agreed to the request, and the citizens approved a quarter-cent tax that was imposed for about four years until the bonds were paid off.

Commissioner Kevin Rasure said the county had authority under that law to ask the county citizens to pass another sales tax of up to 75 percent, but under that law the county was limited to fixing just the one road. He said the new law has broadened the language to include city streets and county roads.

“With the new change, we can fix the streets and roads the city and county have listed,” Rasure said, “and when the bonds are paid off in 10 years or less, the county could go back to the voters and ask for a sales tax of up to one cent to rebuild more streets and roads. With the approval from Topeka, we will not have to go back to the Legislature, but we will have to go to the voters of the county for their approval.”

The fast track approval from Topeka is testimony to the efforts of Rasure, Mayor Rick Billinger, City Manager Wayne Hill, who all went to Topeka, and the air transportation provided by Larry McCants of the First National Bank. While Rasure was the only one of the Goodland group to testify at the House and Senate hearings, Morrison said the presence of the others that showed the community support for the bill.

The support and response for the energy center shown at the air permit hearing Wednesday seemed to be under the spell of those same stars aligned to help with the legislative effort.

Whether it is the stars or something closer, we feel the forces are aligned to give Sherman County a boost that could turn our sagging economy into a boom. We have confidence the citizens will see it as a positive step and vote to approve the sales tax to fix our streets and roads. — *Tom Betz*

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Member: Kansas Press Association
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e-mail: star-news@nwkansas.com

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nwkansas.com

N.T. Betz, Director of Internet Services

(ntbetz@nwkansas.com)

Evan Barnum, Systems Admin.(support@nwkansas.com)

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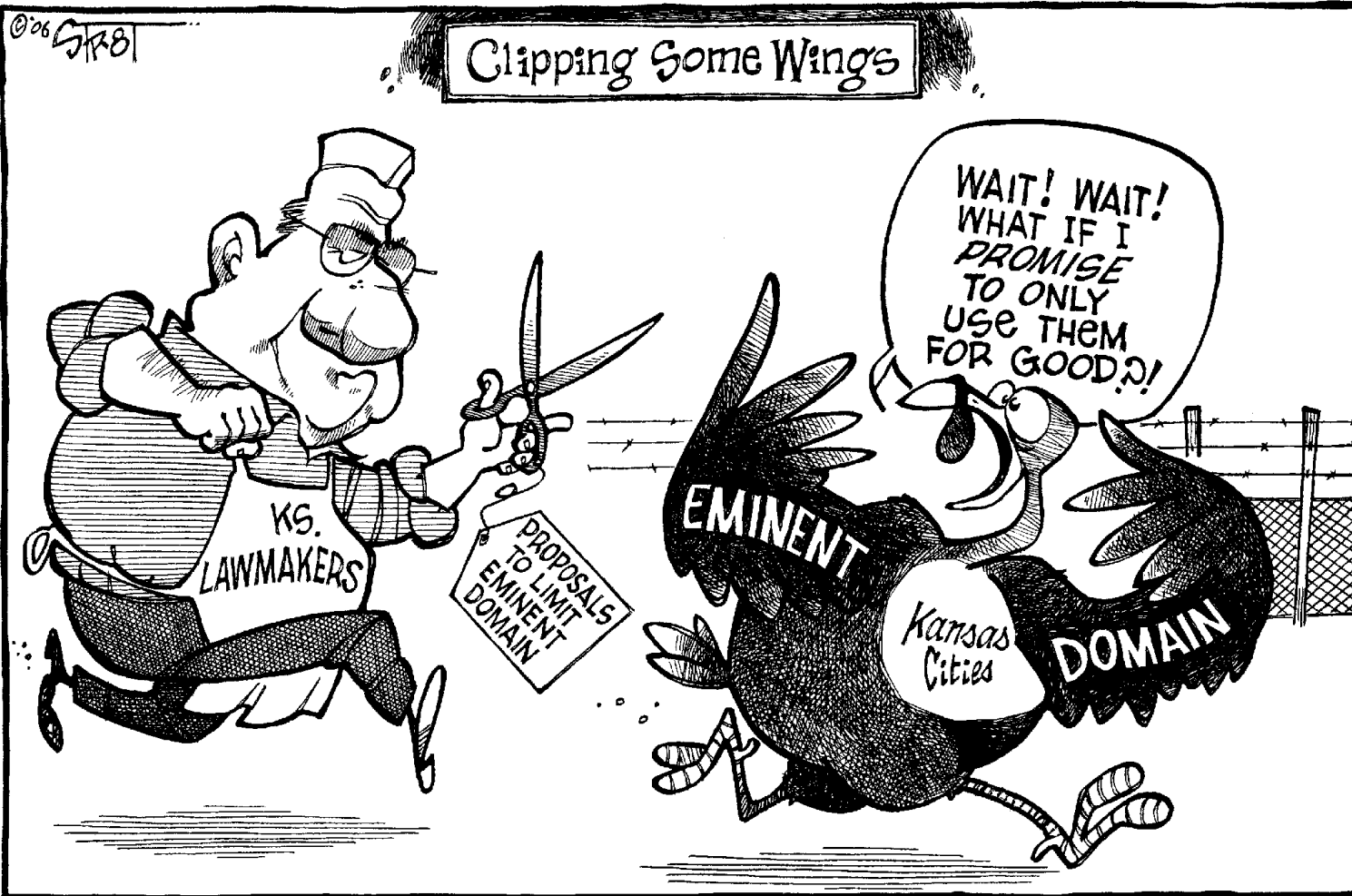
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Let our schools be successful, adaptive

One thing no one is talking about, in all the anguished chatter about Kansas schools, is the one thing that might make them more innovative, more interesting, more successful and more adaptive.

And that is letting school boards and school administrators actually run their schools.

All sides in the school debate, in fact, want more control over local schools, not less. There is no “liberal” or “conservative” side here, only diverse groups, each of which thinks it knows how to run our schools better than we do.

As in most arguments where everyone “knows” the one and only right answer, it’s likely that no one does.

In America, we’re supposed to value diversity, but no one really believes all that hokey. “Just do it my way!” they cry.

The tax-and-spend crowd is sure the schools need more money. They want to shower schools with money with so many strings attached that every district will have to restructure, often cutting instruction budgets painfully, to spend it.

The so-called conservatives want to protect “traditional values,” but their agenda is to dictate their religion, their social values, their idea of law and order to everyone through the schools.

Administrators at the so-called “medium” schools, typified by Salina and Dodge City, see



steve haynes

- along the sappa

surrounding rural districts getting more money for each student, and it galls them. The smaller districts, often in the same county, lack the crime and security problems that bedevil big schools. Parents often see them as a haven from drugs and violence, and send their students there.

And boy do the bigger districts hate that, especially when the state pays those smaller districts more under the “low-enrollment weighting” formula than their home school would get to educate them.

The so-called conservatives say they want “competition” in schools, but where there is competition, schools — at least those on the losing end — hate it.

Then there’s the “No Child Left Behind” Act, President Bush’s big education initiative that declares that every child must be made competent in basic skills, though that is impossible.

The law sets expensive goals for local schools without providing any money to meet them. States are supposed to find the cash. For a supposedly conservative Republican admin-

Representative schedule town hall meetings

Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer and I will be traveling the district on Saturday. We will be at town hall meetings in Stockton from 8 to 9 a.m., Hill City 9:45 to 10:45 a.m., Hoxie 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., Colby 1:45 to 2:45 p.m. (all Central Time) and Goodland 2:30 to 3:40 p.m. Mountain Time. We look forward to meeting with you.

Here are summaries of some of the issues we debated this last week:

Age of Marital Consent

The age that someone may marry in Kansas is 12 for girls and 14 for boys. Granted, marriage for children that young requires judicial or parental consent, but technically a preteen girl and an adolescent boy could marry in Kansas. House Bill 2541 would bring Kansas in line with 40 other states by raising the minimum age of marriage to 16 and require parental or judicial consent for those 17 or 18. The House Federal and State Affairs committee has referred the bill to the full House and recommended passage.

Machinery and Equipment tax

The Machinery and Equipment tax exemption has moved out of committee and is being scheduled for debate. Concerns from local government were eased with the addition of the “Siegfreid Slider” amendment, authored by Rep. Arlen Siegfried (R-Olathe), allowing for a sliding scale of reimbursement to local taxing authorities who may lose revenue. Action is expected this week.

Sales Tax Holiday

If House Bill 2601 is passed, the “back to school sale” advertised by many retailers would mean even more in Kansas. Introduced



jim morrison

- capitol review

by Rep. Virgil Peck (R-Tyro), the bill would provide a sales tax holiday for back-to-school shoppers. The length and the date of the proposed holiday are still being debated, but would likely be in late July or early August and include a Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

Nuclear Plant Security

Security at Wolf Creek Nuclear Power Plant is tight. Armed guards, vehicle barriers and razor wire are only a few of the precautions taken to protect against a possible attack on the facility. However, officials believe greater authority is necessary for their guards in the post 9/11 world. House Bill 2703 allows armed guards at Wolf Creek to carry larger caliber automatic weapons and grants them legal protection if they are ever forced to use them.

Current law places Wolf Creek under the same classification as other property in Kansas and therefore does not allow lethal force to protect that property. Lethal force is only allowed if a person’s own life is in danger. This bill would narrowly define the instances in which lethal force could be used by the guards, but will also ensure that a greater loss of life is avoided by preventing an attack on the reactor.

Paying Veterans on Veterans Day

The House Federal and State Affairs Committee this week heard testimony from a young

istration, it’s a remarkable intrusion into local affairs.

The theme that runs through all these things is more control at the top and less for school boards and superintendents. We have bright and capable people in charge of our schools, but because all sides think they know what is best, all want to dictate how schools are run.

Where are the classical liberals who value constitutional rights and individual thought? The conservatives who put liberty and freedom of expression above all else? The budget-minded fiscal conservatives who want to see the best education for the least expense?

Gone, apparently, replaced by dictatorial types who issue mandates on a whim.

The competition idea might just be the key. Schools that produce better scores, a better environment and better learning, experience shows, will draw more students. They will get more money.

There’s nothing wrong with that. It works. It promotes innovation and experimentation, and it promotes success.

It also draws the ire of the losers, if the whole sorry Kansas lawsuit experience is any measure. Be successful, and smaller, and your mediocre opponents will crush you like dust.

So much for diversity.

Get out the checkbook.

And the cookie cutters.

