

from other pens...

Sales-tax holiday not a good policy

Congratulations to the Kansas Legislature for not using sales taxes as a proverbial carrot.

During the legislative session, legislators reviewed a proposal for Kansas to have a sales-tax holiday. If approved, a couple of days would have been selected to waive all sales taxes on select items purchased for students to prepare for school.

Some weekend in August is the typical time to have such an event. The practice is done in other states as a way to increase business and attract shoppers from border states.

Sales-tax-free shopping days are an insult to the purpose of taxes. Kansas, like many other states, are wrestling with budgets. States are unsure how much income they will have and even more unsettled on how every cent will be spent.

If states are concerned of their income from taxes, why in the heck would a state agree to stop collection of its income for a couple of days? To complement that, cities and counties wave their taxes at the same time.

Sure, the cumulative amount of taxes waived for a couple of days during the state would be minuscule over an entire year's budget, but it can still put the state in a bad situation.

Consider the states that laid off employees because of a lack of income. How frustrating would it be for a laid-off state worker to go shopping on a sales-tax free day, knowing the amount not paid funded the job he used to have?

States should let the stores provides the shopping incentives. It's common for stores to offer 10, 20 or more percent off, especially during back-to-school sales. Here in Thomas County, the shopper would save 6.55 percent on the tax break.

The state of Kansas saved itself a whole lot more.

— John Van Nostrand, Colby Free Press

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The Goodland Star-News

(USPS No. 222-460. ISSN 0893-0562)
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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 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@nw-kansas.com. Advertising questions can be sent to: goodlandads@nw-kansas.com
The Goodland Star-News assumes no liability for mistakes or omissions in advertising or failure to publish beyond the actual cost of the ad.
SUBSCRIPTIONS: In Sherman County and adjacent counties: three months, \$24; six months, \$42; 12 months, \$76. Out of area, weekly mailing of two issues: three months, \$34; six months, \$49; 12 months, \$84. Mailed individually each day: 12 months, \$119. (All tax included.)

Incorporating:
The Goodland Daily News
1932-2003

The Sherman County Herald
Founded by Thomas McCants
1935-1989

Nor'West Newspapers
Haynes Publishing Company

THE SHERMAN COUNTY STAR
Founded by Eric and Roxie Yonkey
1994-2001



Food important in Chinese culture

Darin and Kati (Amos) Curts are WorldTeach volunteers in the People's Republic of China. The group, affiliated with Harvard University, places volunteer English teachers with the Hunan Department of Education and Foreign Affairs. Darin and Kati are teaching at Yueyang Ba Zhong (Yueyang No. 8 Middle School) for a year.

May 2006

Ni chi fan le ma? (Have you eaten?)

Food is so important in Chinese culture that it serves as a greeting when seeing someone you know. It's a pleasantry that defines the fact that everyone must eat; and if you are eating, then you are well. There's even a Chinese saying that only those without food can really appreciate the importance of it.

During our nine months in China, food has not been something we have been deprived of. Admittedly, it took us about four weeks to become accustomed to it, during which time we were not actively seeking good restaurants. Since then, however, we have learned to love the unique foods and tastes one can find in mainland China.

Every street has dozens of shops that will cook up an array of fresh vegetables and meats. One of these shops has come to be "ours" and our students and colleagues often comment that they've heard we like to eat certain dishes.

The owners are a couple with a toddler son and can be considered friends. They live in a back portion of their two-story shop. The wok and burner sit on the sidewalk, and the foods to choose from are displayed along an interior wall. Several small tables and chairs sit opposite.

Larger restaurants have extensive menus, while vendors wander the streets with specialty snacks like sweet potatoes, fried fish on a stick, and candied fruit. As opposed to most Chinese buffets in the States, no one offers all-you-can-eat, but there's never a lack of variety.

When invited to eat with a friend or colleague, we're never sure what will appear, but we're also not disappointed. For a Christmas banquet, we enjoyed a stew consisting of vegetables and dog meat. During a visit to a friend's neighborhood in a nearby town, we ate snake late in the evening.

Though it's fun to tell friends about the strange fare, not every dish is out of the ordinary. Recently, a group of students came to our home and showed us how to make dumplings, a simple traditional dish that we have been known to enjoy for every meal of the day during the winter. A bowl of eggs and tomatoes has become our favorite dish for the past few weeks, and an order of cucumbers can com-

plete lunch. To top it off, every dish must be doused with a handful of la jiao (hot peppers), as is the custom in Hunan.

If the overwhelming choices have us boggled, we also have the option of just following the customs of our peers. Breakfast is early in the morning and generally consists of a bowl of soupy noodles, some porridge, and maybe a steamed bun. Lunch is a short meal of noodles or rice with a small bit of meat and vegetables, perhaps grabbing something from one of the vendors as a snack on the way home. If dinner is not cooked at home and eaten with family, it is probably at a large restaurant with friends or business associates, and almost always comes with baiju, the Chinese white wine that more closely resembles grain alcohol. If the night has gone late, night snacks are very popular on the sidewalks of nearly every neighborhood and offer snakes, grilled fish and beef on a stick, or the original "tasty shrimp," which is a clever name for a dizzyingly spicy crawfish.

We would gladly give up all the Panda Express and Taste of China buffets for an oily bowl of duck neck or eggplants. With only a couple months left, we will continue to seek out new dishes and delicacies, chopsticks in hand.

Good health and great eating!

Darin and Kati Curts

Legislature wraps up this week

This should be the last week for the Legislative session. I expect it to be completed on Wednesday.

The stalling issue is education. Many of you will see I have voted against many of the school finance bills and for many as well. I have voted for large amounts up to \$600 million and amounts as low as \$400 million. I have even voted against some plans that provide more money for every one of my schools districts. More money does not always equate to future stability and increases.

I know a few of you have made the statement "Raise taxes for the schools." You need to know education may not benefit simply by raising taxes or providing more money. The last high-dollar plan — I think it was \$575 million — I voted against provided more money to all my schools in 2007 and 2008, then we began to receive less money as the enrollment "correlation weighting" numbers began to go down and shift cash from the low-enrollment districts to the higher-enrollment schools.



jim morrison
• capitol review

Over a relatively short period of time, we would then be receiving less money than previous years unless we had enrollment increases or consolidation.

You may not realize that voting for the higher-dollar amounts could easily equate to voting to consolidate small rural school districts. That potential consolidation would come at a time when reapportionment will likely have us see the loss of two or more legislators in the western half of Kansas, a time we will not then be able to prevent the consolidation request of the Legislature. We have been successful in defending those by as little as one vote in the past.

In other words, the choice may be, go ahead

and raise more money for the schools and risk forced consolidation without having to pass consolidation legislation. Consolidation can be build into the funding such that over time, smaller districts will see budget cuts so severe they will have to consolidate. That is part of the play behind school finance, a reduction in the number of school districts and administrative personnel over time.

What I expect to see passed is a \$466 million, three-year education plan that will provide more money for all schools in my district than any bill we have seen so far. In addition, I expect we will fare well in the out years and not see forced consolidation. However, no such bill exists — as of Tuesday morning.

Our phones are off and secretaries are not allowed to return, so the only way to contact me is via e-mail at jmorrison@ink.org.

I hope to be back in the district by this weekend. The final day (Sine Die) is scheduled for Thursday, May 25.

Thanks for your support and notes and letters.

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