

Ending the year in black will take cuts

Kansas legislators face unpleasant choices when they go to work next month.

The state expects a deficit approaching \$147 million this year, with the number likely to top \$1 billion in the next fiscal year when it ends June 30, 2010.

That's without drastic cuts, of course, but the state Constitution does not allow the government to run a deficit. The so-called "cash basis" law requires the state to end the year in the black.

The last time this happened, the Legislature "solved" the problem mostly with smoke and mirrors. It shifted funds, changed tax-payment dates and shuffled things around. The result was a one-time wonder, a budget that at least looked balanced.

Those tricks can't likely be repeated, though. That leaves the incoming Legislature with the task of actually cutting spending. And we are not talking this time about cutting spending requests by state departments, as leaders in Topeka so often do.

The figures put out by state budget analysts require cuts from what the state will actually spend this year, and next.

What to cut. There are no easy choices.

Public education takes up about half the budget. The governor and many legislators have pledged not to cut education. It's popular, and they remember when they held school spending down last time, school boards sued for their "rightful" share of the budget.

State courts, ever mindful of increasing their power and diminishing the Legislature's, ruled that the schools deserved more money. The justices cited a study paid for by the Legislature to justify their order.

Cutting schools won't go far, except maybe as a last resort. If other programs all get cut,

the schools might take a small hit.

Next up in size and threat to the budget are the so-called entitlements, welfare and medical programs which use a lot of federal money and come under federal rules. It's tough for the state to cut Medicaid payments to the poor and elderly, even at a time of dire need.

And the feds might penalize the state for any cuts that run afoul of their rules.

Which leaves everything else. Transportation and higher education are the next-biggest pieces of the pie. Both are important parts of what the state does, and both face ever-increasing demands for money.

While transportation has its own "trust fund," it gets general tax money from the state as well. With the motor fuels tax increasingly less dependable, as fuel mileage declines and use of "alternative" fuels increases, the "gas tax" brings in less and less. That's one reason transportation needs injections of sales tax money.

Colleges already have been cut to the point where they get only about 25 percent of their money from the state. A recent program to fix up buildings has addressed the worst issues of "deferred maintenance" on campus, but universities and smaller schools still need money.

A lot of "minor" state programs will feel the knife, some the ax. And cuts may still be required for the big boys, schools, colleges, roads and "entitlements."

Nobody in their right minds would take this job on. We're not sure what that says about our legislators, but they do have some tough decisions to make.

Like all the rest of us, though, the state of Kansas will survive this downturn and live to face another.

— Steve Haynes

Hubby takes off for the city

He left me. The dirty dog left me with all the Christmas stuff to do, a daily paper to put out and the menagerie to feed.

Mind you, this isn't the first time Steve has taken off and left me behind to cope with the daily problems of home and businesses. And this time at least, he isn't off to some exotic locale while I toil away here at home.

Last time he took off it was to China — Taiwan to be exact. Before that, he's left me for trips to the United Arab Emirates, Nicaragua and Tunisia.

This latest exciting adventure is taking him to Concordia, Emporia, Lawrence, Kansas City and Columbia, Mo., so I'm not too bent out of shape this time.

Actually, the trip was supposed to be just to Columbia for a National Newspaper Association meeting and then on to Kansas City for an Associated Press meeting. But since he was headed that way anyway, he said he'd stop by and see my mother in Concordia. Since he was going that way, I decided he should stop by to see his sister and brother in Emporia and take some food I had to our son in Lawrence.

I went with him on this trip last year. Same itinerary — Concordia to see Mom, Emporia to see in-laws and Lawrence to see son then on to Columbia.

Since I'm not on the board of the newspaper association, I didn't have to attend their meeting. Instead I got to spend the day in exciting downtown Columbia. It was snowing lightly and the temperature was about 10 degrees.

I spent the entire day in a coffee shop addressing and signing Christmas cards. I downed two lattes and a giant chocolate brownie. I upgraded my table twice as I moved away from the front door, which let in freezing air every time someone came in.

So, this year we decided that maybe I could stay here and take over the job of putting out the Colby paper for a week.

Hey, no sweat. I've been publishing weekly newspapers since 1980.



Open Season

By Cynthia Haynes
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I figured I could handle one small daily for a week.

But, I figured without all the hoopla over Christmas and our animals.

The cats had vet appointments. The dog had an eye infection and had to have antibiotics twice a day — and I didn't get my Christmas cards addressed.

I did get the outside lights put on the bushes out front and even decorated the little cedar tree in the back yard, but that's another story.

You'd think I'd have lost weight with all the running I've been doing this last week. Nope, I gained three pounds.

Meanwhile, I'm waiting for Steve to reappear. 'Cause he left me and the dog and the cats and all that work.

And we know who's doing the work. Ain't the dog.

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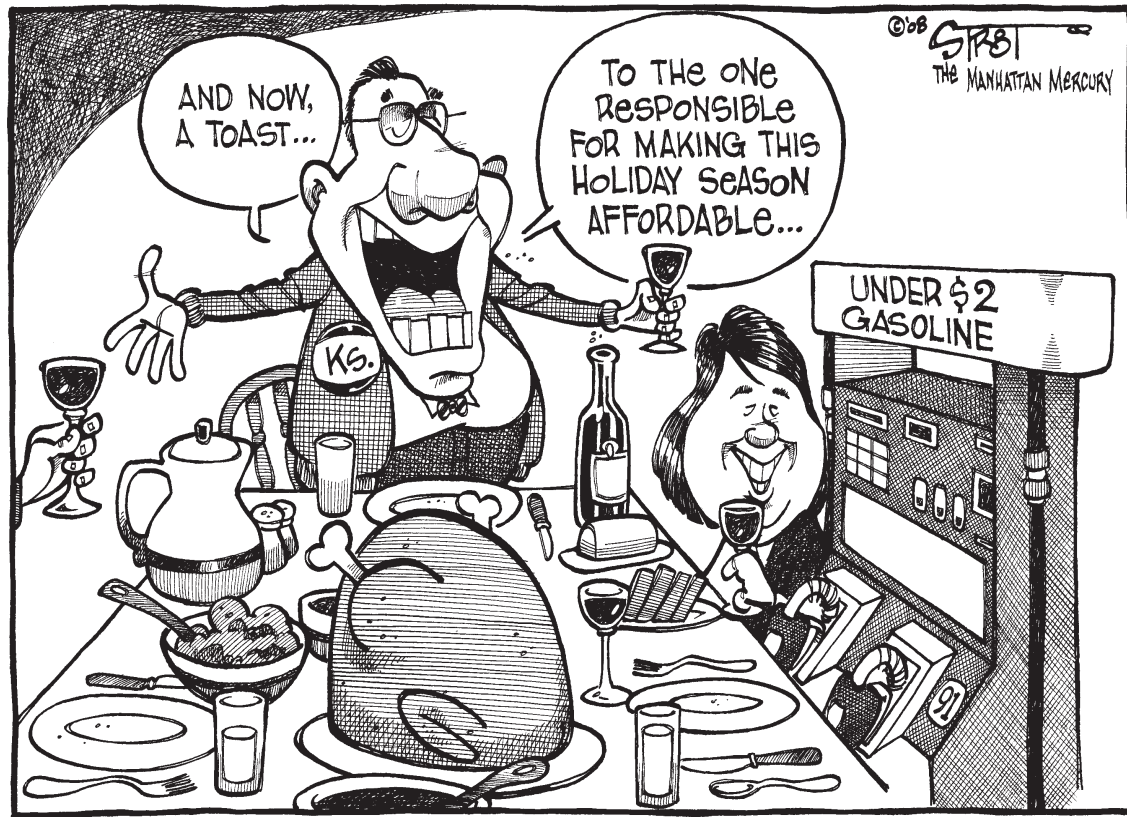
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Choosing leader a hard task

Choosing a "CEO" is no easy task.

With the Oberlin School Board and City Council apparently both hunting for chief executives this year, it would be easy to sit on the sidelines and pick at their choices.

The truth is, though, that there's just no way to know what's in a person's heart.

Anyone who's made these hiring decisions can attest to that. The track record of most people in top jobs bears testimony to it.

City managers, police chiefs, pastors, school superintendents and principals, county administrators, top leaders in any business — if a person in one of these jobs lasts more than two years, they're exceptional.

If a board or an employer finds someone who takes to a job and runs with it, they're fortunate indeed.

Candidates are interviewed, backgrounds get checked, references are called. For a lot of reasons, problems that later seem obvious never come up.

Candidates tend to talk a good game. Everyone wants to put his best foot forward in these interviews, in their resume, in the references they choose.

And most of us are not trained to be experts at hiring. Most board members, most people in business know how to do many things well. Human resources isn't part of the curriculum for most people, though.

So, when references are called, often former employers fear giving a bad recommendation. Sometimes



Along the Sappa

By Steve Haynes
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they have agreed not to reveal why a candidate left his or her last job. Sometimes they fear a lawsuit. It's common.

Candidates may not admit to past sins, preferring to talk about their strong points. Former employers public and private often allow a leader to resign, rather than making the problems public. Investigation may or may not bring things out.

Even candidates without a skeleton in the closet may be ineffective in a given job, due to temperament or interest or the way they connect in a given place.

And all things being equal, there's no way to accurately predict the dynamic that will develop in a given town, among a board, the employees and the chief executive.

Some will last a decade or two, even longer. Many will last five years or more and make a positive contribution, as Gary Shike did as Oberlin city administrator.

As many also will be two years and out.

And in the end, after all the enquiries are made, it still comes down to something of a guessing game. Each board member has his or her hunch about who will work out.

So we don't judge any board

strictly solely on the results of its hiring. Over the long run, you hope a town, a district, a business has more good hires than bad and collects a bunch of good and faithful employees.

That usually happens. Remember that the board members are volunteers trying to do a difficult job, and trying to do what's best.

There have been decisions in the past we've questioned. Hiring, like anything else, is an issue that reasonable people can and will disagree on. But the board members themselves have to make the decision in the end. They will reap the rewards or suffer the consequences, and all for little or no pay.

The only thing we'd ask, and this in itself is no guarantee of a good hire, is that the process be as open and transparent to the citizens and taxpayers as possible and that the public at large be considered a partner in each public hire.

Those who are paying the bills may not get to vote on the decision, after all, but they will share in the benefits or losses. They deserve a place at the table.

Chickens get their revenge

I could write the sequel to, "Revenge of the Killer Tomatoes," It would be called, "Revenge of the Killer Chickens." At least that's what the headless opossum I found in the chicken coop would call it.

Something had been terrorizing our chickens. Digging marks by the fence of their pen, strewn feathers and empty egg shells in the nests were evidence. Saturday night, I guess the chickens had had enough.

Sunday morning, I fed and watered the flock, as usual. But, upon entering the coop to gather eggs, I noticed a hairy lump of something in the corner. It wasn't moving and upon closer inspection I could see the unmistakable tail of a 'possum.

It's a good deal he still had his tail, because, obviously, the chickens had sought their revenge and taken it out on his head. Perhaps, they figured there was strength in numbers.

At any rate, the score now stands at: Chickens - 1; 'Possums - 0.

A perfect example of "Pecking Order."

—ob—

Like lots of men, my husband won't go to the doctor unless he's almost in his death throes. That's why, when he came home from work at noon on Thursday and agreed to see a doctor that same afternoon, I knew



Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts
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he was really sick.

The diagnosis: bronchitis. The cure: lots of rest and a cocktail of antibiotics, cough suppressants and an inhaler.

He came home from the doctor's visit, changed into sweats and warm socks and promptly went to sleep. And, except for violent fits of coughing, that's about all he has done for the last three days. Putting on clothes to go to chapel on Sunday is the most activity he's been able to accomplish in days.

—ob—

I started my Christmas baking Friday. My vision was to have dozens of spritz cookies, in all colors and sizes, baked and boxed by nightfall. A blow-out in the barrel of my Super Shooter cookie press dashed my dream.

Jim has assured me that he can fix it "good as new." I hope so. Otherwise I don't know what I'm going to do with the 25 pounds of

flour and sugar I have stacked in the kitchen waiting to be converted into Christmas confections.

—ob—

I don't mean to frighten you, but, I just realized there are less than two weeks left until Christmas. How did that happen? I sure hope you're farther along with your preparations than I am.

From the Bible

I will love thee, O Lord, my strength.

The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower.
Psalms 18:1-2

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Letter to the Editor

To the Editor:

Good bye, America. We've had it now. We have a president elect who is a big government, welfare state socialist with non-Christian origins, no leadership experience and a long-standing association with a terrorist and other people who hate our America.

He will be supported by a far-left Democrat Congress led by Sen. Harry Reid and Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who despise capitalism and personal freedom more than they love our country.

He will also be constantly boosted by a lap-dog liberal media that has shamelessly promoted him since

he graduated from ACORN. They all belong to the crowd that blames America for all the world's woes.

As soon as they all allow us to deteriorate to Third-World status, we will be easy prey for terrorists and aggressor nations.

To make our position even worse,

the Republicans in Washington have neither the interest or the guts to stand up to them. We need term limits now.

Hello, Amerika.

R.W. Yeager
Norton

