

Kansas revenue system leaves state hurting

Many proposals have been floated on how to solve the state of Kansas's "revenue problem", some worth listening to.

First we should understand, the state has a revenue problem not because previous legislatures gave away the farm, as some say, though there is an element of truth to that.

No, Kansas is broke because we are broke. Kansas is hurting because we are hurting.

Income tax collections are down because people are out of work, others are not making as much as they once were and businesses are suffering in this, the worst recession since the Great Depression.

Sales tax collections suffer because we are not buying as much

If there's no money out there to tax, the state will be poor. In fact, Kansas was doing fine despite the tax breaks passed over the last 10 years — as long as the economy was growing.

The state had so much money, it could — and did — spend more and more every year, with expenses growing far faster than the rate of inflation.

Over the years, the state eliminated sales taxes on farm machinery and manufacturing machinery. It gave breaks to the elderly and the poor. It spent even more on higher and higher school spending and more social programs, because the dough kept rolling in.

When the economy went south, of course, this all had to stop.

Then came the cry to eliminate all the "loopholes" in the tax structure. You know, the other guy's tax breaks.

For when it comes to tax policy, everybody benefits from some part of it. And no one wants to lose their personal tax break. That represents "sound fiscal policy."

That's why when the Legislature decided to try closing some tax breaks, it started with

one we all get: the exemption on home utility bills.

The idea apparently was that special interests, such as farmers and business groups, have more pull than everybody. So much for that idea.

There is something wrong with the state's tax system, however, when you realize that, according to a 2006 study, only 7 percent of Kansas property and 24 percent of Kansas sales actually are taxed.

Ed Flentje, a professor of political science at Wichita State University, proposed a "tax-break commission" similar to the base closing commissions which review military installations for closure. It would comb the state's tax structure and propose changes.

His colleague in the "Insight Kansas" column, Fort Hays State professor Chapman Rackaway, went him one further: he proposed just eliminating tax breaks and instituting a "flat tax" for the sales tax. Doing so, he estimated, would mean the rate could be reduced from 5.3 percent today to just 1.9 percent.

Applying the sales tax to services, which today are not taxed, would more than close the state's "revenue gap" expected next year.

Who could complain? Rackaway said free-market believers should be happy to see the state get out of the business of deciding which activities to favor. Everyone should benefit from the simplicity.

Of course, the same logic could apply to the income and property taxes. Just tax everyone and everything a little.

Even Girl Scout cookies, churches and hospitals, rich and poor, corporations and small businesses.

The idea has merit. Rates would be low and fair. Only accountants and tax lawyers would be out anything, and they'd find ways to make money.

— Steve Haynes



First harvest from garden

I know bragging will get you in trouble, but I couldn't help it.

I was telling everyone last week that we had had a spinach salad out of our garden before the 15th of March.

It's pretty amazing, really. Late last summer, after I pulled a bunch of corn stalks, I planted two rows of lettuce with a row of spinach between. We enjoyed several salads of baby spinach and lettuce before the snow and ice covered the garden and froze in place the small fence I put up to protect the crop from the dog.

All winter long, it sat there, a small fenced enclosure in the middle of the garden, a leaf-and-lawn-clipping-covered square. When it wasn't buried in snow, you could see the little, frozen (I assumed) spinach leaves sticking up.

Then a couple of weeks ago, Steve came into the house munching a baby spinach leaf. The crop, he claimed had survived and was growing again.

The next day, I was able to harvest enough tiny leaves off the spinach for a couple of salads — the first produce of the 2010 garden.

My bragging after a meeting the other night led to a discussion of gardens and unrelated topics.

My friend May noted that the first time she spotted a typographical error in *The Wall Street Journal*, it had been in a gardening/cooking



Open Season

By Cynthia Haynes
c.haynes@nwkansas.com

section.

She said it must have been 10 or 15 years ago, but she still remembers reading about how to fix rhubarb stocks.

She still giggles at the thought of cooking stocks and perhaps bonds instead of stalks.

Steve claimed that they didn't cook the rhubarb, they just locked up the bad stalks in the stocks. But then, he also admitted, he doesn't much like rhubarb.

Another man grinned and noted that since May had moved, he expected to find more asparagus in his patch this year. May just smiled and said that she still knew where he lived, and even though she didn't live next door anymore, that patch was still in danger.

I inquired where this productive asparagus area was located. My own asparagus patch has not been doing well lately, and it might be nice to have a backup patch, er, plan.

Actually, I do have a backup plan. I'm starting a new patch on a different side of the house. The one I

had started out was fine, but a small tree nearby has grown so over the past 10 years that it gets too much shade now.

So now all I have to do is dig out an iris bed on the south side of the house, spade it up, plant some asparagus roots and not worry about getting my exercise for a week or so afterward.

And, I still have to figure out how to get the garden rototilled without killing that row of spinach in the middle.

From the Bible

You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

It is written: "As surely as I live," says the Lord, "every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God."

Romans 14:10-11 (NIV)

Adults still need their moms

It seems like we've been gone forever. In reality, it's only been two weeks. However, we've managed to cover a lot of miles in that time. By midweek, it will have been all the way to Mexico and back.

Bottom line is: my daughter, Halley, is recuperating beautifully from her surgery. In fact, she's back in her own apartment. Every day finds her getting stronger.

The only thing that remains is to transport all the things she left at her sister's house back over to her apartment. There's her laptop, a suitcase of clothes, her cell phone charger and some groceries she brought over. Plus a brand-new mini-grill for hamburgers we found at a neighborhood resale shop for two bucks. Hey, a girl's gotta shop.

Halley admitted to me that she had originally thought she would go through this without telling anyone.

"What was I thinking?" she said. "There is no way I could have done this alone."

"Even though I felt bad you had to sleep in a chair, Mom, it made me feel good when I woke up in the night to see you there."

It doesn't matter how old our kids are. That's just what moms do.

— ob —

Jim and I managed to rendezvous



Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts
quality-pro@webtv.net

in San Antonio with our kids and grandkids there. He stopped there after completing the mission trip to Mexico and I brought our granddaughter Taylor with me to spend a day with our girls, Jennifer and Becky and granddaughters Angelia, Chantelle, Alexandria and Aniston.

We also saw a picture (sonogram) of our first great-grandchild. And it's a boy! His mother, Angelia, has already named him Kayden. I hope I spelled that right.

We've had all girls for so long, we might not know how to take care of a little boy, but we are committed to learning. We've already told Angelia that we'll be back in July after he's born.

Angelia has been stockpiling layette items and is getting everything ready for Kayden's arrival. She's going to be a great little mother.

— ob —

Like the rest of the country, we've

been glued to the television watching the voting on passage of the health-care reform bill. Now that it's passed, I still don't know what it all means.

I was really proud of Congressman Bart Stupak of Michigan for sticking to his guns regarding the abortion language. When the president issued the order prohibiting federal funding of abortions, I thought to myself, "Well, I can live with that." And evidently, that was Mr. Stupak's opinion, because he immediately cast a "yes" vote.

Now, commentators are telling us a presidential order doesn't change a thing. Other political analysts are telling us the whole bill is unconstitutional. And this morning, about 40 state attorney generals are lining up to challenge the bill.

If elected officials can't understand it, how is John Q. Public supposed to? All we want to know is, "How will this affect me?"

Lagoon smell is not funny

The Oberlin City Council asked me to explain in *The Oberlin Herald* why the city's sewer lagoons stink. While you and I probably can think of many jokes to insert here, the smell is no laughing matter. As such, I offer the following:

Oberlin's sewage travels from throughout the city to three large lagoon ponds on the south side of town. Water moves through the three ponds and eventually back out to the creek. During the process, bacteria and algae decompose materials and insoluble materials sink to the bottom, where they stay.

The bacteria produce enzymes to decompose organic waste, to absorb oxygen, to produce carbon dioxide and to reproduce. The algae, through photosynthesis in sunlight, absorb the carbon dioxide from bacteria, produce the oxygen for bacteria, consume nutrients, and reproduce.

The action in the treatment ponds relies on bacteria and algae working together to digest and oxidize waste. In the spring, when ice cover melts, the ponds go through a transition. During this time, a natural process in lakes and ponds occurs when the now less dense warmer water at the bottom rises to the surface. This causes a concentrated amount of materials that are in the middle



City Notes

By Austin Gilley
City Administrator
agilley@oberlinkansas.gov

of the process to rise to the top — commonly known as "spring turnover."

Unfortunately, Oberlin's lagoons have been experiencing similar problems during other seasons throughout their three years of operation, too. It is possible the lagoons are not large enough. When I checked, however, I found the lagoons were constructed and designed to match specifications regulated by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment.

State officials have suggested that other "newer lagoons" have been experiencing similar problems. Unofficial opinions seem to be that recent regulatory changes requiring sealing of new lagoons with membrane liners in groundwater-sensitive areas have inhibited the flow of additional oxygen from the soil. The recommendation is to add oxygen either chemically or mechanically, and the city is pursuing both.

As an interim measure, city workers are adding hydrogen peroxide to increase oxygen and some deodorizer to try to help with the intensified seasonal problem. The city recently awarded a contract installation of solar-powered mixers. Once installed the devices will mix the ponds. This will increase oxygen concentration within the top two feet of the pond to create an "odor cap."

Installation of these solar mixers is anticipated in the next few weeks, and information from actual installations in other cities suggest that over time, they will make a significant difference.

Half the cost of the solar mixers will be paid by money from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (federal stimulus money) through the state, and the city's half has been added to the original state loan terms for the lagoon project, which came in under budget.

Photo Policy

The Oberlin Herald wants to emphasize photos of people doing things in the community. If you know of an event or news happening that we should attend, please call 475-2206.

Please be sure to allow a couple of days' notice so we can arrange to be there.

Space in the paper is limited and so is the time of our staff, so we may not be able to get to every event, but we will try.

Because space is so limited, we *cannot* run team or group photos, any pictures of people lined up or of people passing checks, certificates and the like. (We will always try to make room for a story about any of these events, however.)

We do run wedding and engagement pictures and "mug" shots with stories and obituaries, when they

are provided to us. Please remember that we need a clear, sharp picture. Dark or fuzzy prints will not work.

We cannot return photos unless you submit a self-addressed, stamped envelope with clear instructions for return. Other photos submitted may be picked up at our office within two weeks. After that, they will be disposed of.

Laser proofs of photos which have run in *The Herald* are available, first come, first served.



Write

The Oberlin Herald encourages Letters to the Editor on any topic of public interest. Letters should be brief, clear and to the point. They must be signed and carry the address and phone number of the author.

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We do not publish anonymous letters. We sign our opinions and expect readers to do likewise.

We do not publish form letters or letters about topics which do not pertain to our area. Thank-yous from this area should be submitted to the Want Ad desk.

Letters will not be censored, but will be read and edited for form and style, clarity, length and legality. We will not publish attacks on private individuals or businesses which do not pertain to a public issue.

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Phone: (785) 475-2206 Fax (785) 475-2800

E-mail: oberlin.herald@nwkansas.com

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STAFF

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