

The Legislature is back to the grind

News from
your
legislator
Ward Cassidy



I returned to Topeka last Tuesday with more than a little concern as to how revenues were coming in and how many more cuts were going to have to be made. Most everyone I talk to wants to cut state spending, but not in their area of interest.

In an earlier article, I mentioned how 77 percent of our state's population lives in three major areas and the other 23 percent is the rest of us. With the new census data the discrepancy in representation will grow even greater. I feel that the East - West concern is not nearly as great as the discrepancy between rural and urban concerns. The joke, in Topeka this year, is that Western Kansas starts at Wanamaker road (that is the first major intersection when you arrive in Topeka).

Back to revenues - overall the state is \$22.1 m above estimates for the year; individual income taxes were up 32.9% over last April. Sales tax revenue estimates are down 4.7% from last year (gas price is playing a huge role in the decline of sales tax). An interesting tax shortfall - since the Clean Air Act was established tobacco revenues are down 14.7% to \$7.321 m. It will be awhile till we see the overall health care savings from the act.

On a related issue the House passed out a bill that removes the exemption allowing smoking on the floor of a gaming facility. There was lots of discussion and I voted for the bill.

This final legislative time is referred to as the Veto Session. This time is usually dedicated to addressing bills approved or vetoed by the Governor and working on the state budget. However, this year we have a number of issues still waiting to be wrapped up. In the short time we have left, many items remain on our to-do list including KPERS reform, my leading e-mail question.

KPERS is still in conference committee. A conference committee is the Republican chair, the vice chair, and the minority chair from both the House and Senate. Six people attempt to iron out the differences and get a bill that can be passed by both the House and Senate. Governor Brownback has indicated he wants a good bill that will solve the overall funding problem of the system. There continue to be ideas thrown out and I will be glad to see what the final proposal will be. I initially voted against the House version, as I thought we could do better.

KPERS has an unfunded liability of over \$8 billion, the second worst pension system in the nation. The main point of contention between the House and the Senate concerns the option of transitioning to a 401 (k) like plan.

There has been a major breakdown in the tax committees between the House and Senate and any new legislation looks like it could be passed on to next year. Many of the new legislators have been very frustrated with the state tax codes and now that we have learned the system have plans to address it next year. I feel there is a strong need for tax reform as Kansas is rated 48th in state competitiveness for businesses looking for investment locations. Some good news is that our budget director has indicated that over 100 companies have inquired about moving to Kansas since the passage of the Rural Opportunity Zone Act, many of them are looking at rural areas. High speed internet capabilities will be very important to communities hoping to attract interested companies.

There is so much maneuvering going on between the House and the Senate - give us this policy and we will give up this budget item. Then there are the factions, the Democratic representatives almost always vote as one, the Republicans are divided into ultra conservative, conservatives, moderates, and people like myself. I want to be a NW Kansas Republican and to fight for what is best for our area and for our State.

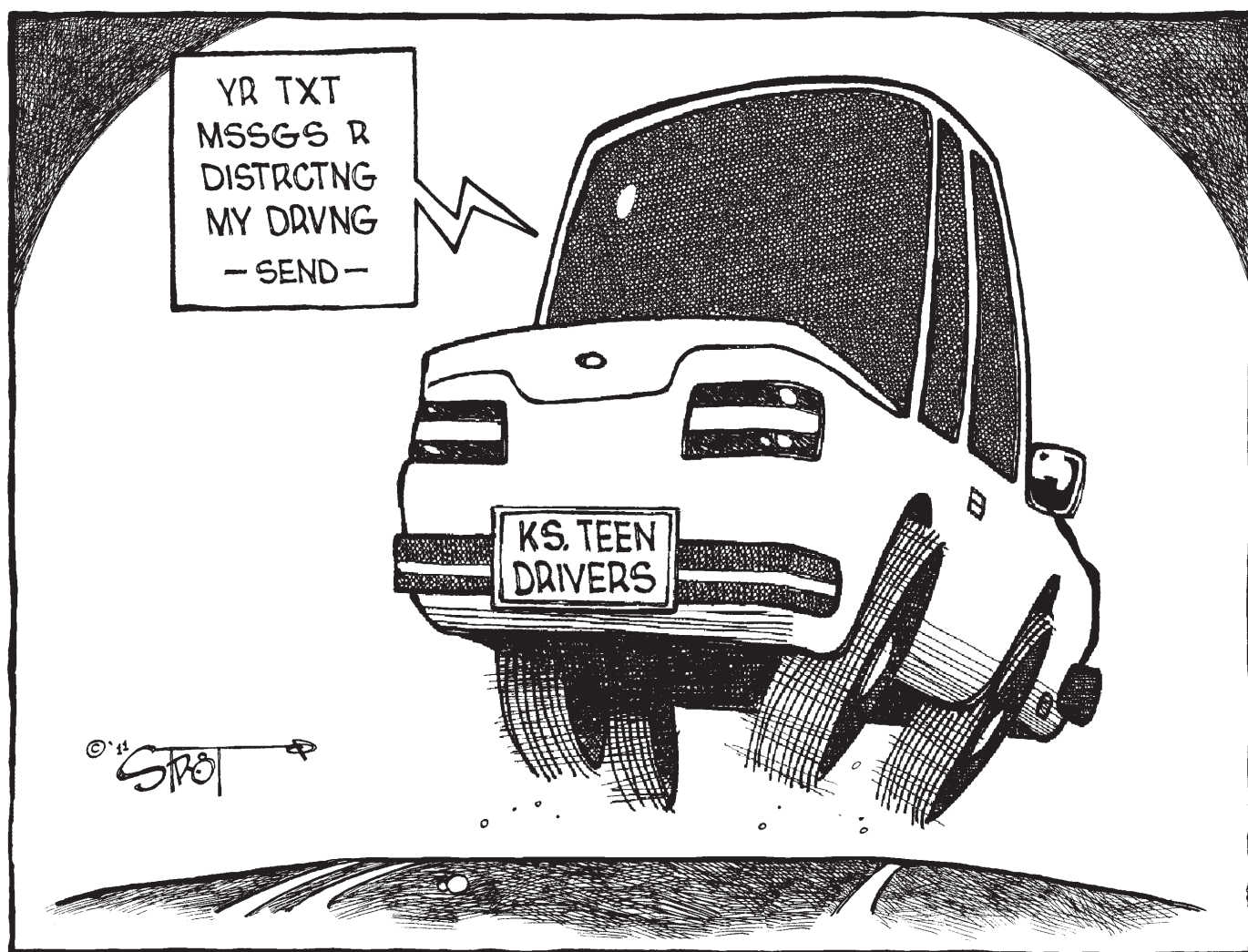
A great big week at the State House is taking place as you read this. The next article will be able to address what we actually accomplished this year. Say your prayers!

Hyperlink: Look for your money at the State Treasurer's website. Several people in NW Kansas have found money they did not know they had coming to them. Go to http://www.kansasstate treasurer.com/prodweb/upownr_1.php.

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A split second can cost so much

If you want to sign up for "Shop Safety 101" class, Jim will be accepting applicants. Just as soon as his wounds heal from his experiment in how NOT to use a table saw.

Jim is one of the few carpenters who still has all his digits. Due to the fact that he has always been diligent about safety. Last Tuesday evening he lost his focus, for just a moment, and the consequences were severe. Working late and pushing to finish a project, he was running a piece of quarter-inch plywood through the table-saw when he took his mind off what he was doing for just a split-second when it happened. Zing! And it was done.

I actually saw it happen. Not directly, but I had just parked the van outside Jim's woodshop. He turned around and saw me and went back to work. That was when it happened. I saw him jump back; he walked to the shop door where he was in the sunlight; turned around; switched off the saw; pulled the light string; came to the van holding his hand and said, "We've got to go to the hospital."

When I saw the blood dripping I knew he was right. After running into the house and rinsing it off, Jim wrapped his hand in a clean t-shirt lying on top of the dryer. He said, "Just drive the speed limit," but I know I pushed it a little. I have son James on speed dial and I called him to tell him what happened and had him call the hospital so they would be ready for us.

The local medical team was professional and efficient giving Jim what he needed most: reassurance and pain killers. Their assessment matched ours:

Out Back Carolyn Plotts



he needed a specialist. While they dressed his hand, I filled the car with gas for the two-hour trip ahead to a regional medical center.

A little side note: Jim called our minister before leaving town and asked him to pray for us and pray to keep the deer out of our way.

Never saw a single one. Long story short: the medical center doctor put in a few stitches to hold it together til we saw the specialist the next day and gave him another shot for pain and a prescription for more.

The nurse who had given him the shot left our cubicle and Jim rubbed his arm, wincing. He said, "Man, that shot hurts worse than my fingers."

Popping her head around the corner, the nurse said, "I heard that."

He was getting a little "loopy" from all the medication but, Jim never lost his sense of humor and tried to keep everyone laughing.

The specialist, who I'm sure sees worse than this, said Jim had severed a tendon but, it could be repaired. So that's where we are at the moment. Waiting to be assigned a slot for surgery. We have every reason to believe he will fully re-

cover and be back to carpentry quickly.

We always look for the silver lining in every situation and this time we found it in our motel room. The emergency room receptionist gave me a card saying it would get us a room for \$49.95 at a certain motel. I called but, they only had smoking rooms left and Jim is terribly allergic to smoke and I had to decline. The motel clerk said her motel had a reciprocal agreement with another motel in town and she would connect me. The second desk clerk said the only room they had left was the \$269.95 per night Jacuzzi Suite.

As I started to say, "Never mind," she quickly told me it was the motel's policy to honor the discount rate even if the Jacuzzi Suite was the only room left. So, we spent the night in a fancy-schmancy suite with three televisions, a jacuzzi tub, a king-size bed with a huge leather headboard, a sofa, chairs, mini-fridge, microwave and a marble-lined shower all for \$49.95.

Too bad we were too exhausted to appreciate it. The next morning I had to apologize to the desk clerk. During the night the dressing had come off Jim's thumb and he bled all over the sheets. It looked like a murder scene and I didn't want her calling the cops when the maid went in to clean the room.

My husband is healthy and strong. He's got too much left to accomplish before he hangs up his hammer. This is just a bump in the road. We've many miles to go before we sleep.

Farmers trying to reclaim a noble profession

Insight

John Schlageck

The real issue - or mission - for livestock producers today must be to reclaim their rightful position as a noble profession. To reclaim this position, farmers and ranchers must continue to take care of their animals and preserve their freedom to operate and maintain successful animal agriculture here in Kansas and across this country.

To do so livestock producers must understand how consumers think and feel. Get inside their heads, if you will.

Today, consumers consider farmers responsible for the humane treatment of farm animals. In recent consumer surveys, people rated animal well being higher than the care and well being of workers in the food system. It did not rank as high as food safety however.

It is not science, technical capacity or ability that drives trust. Instead, it is whether consumers believe agriculture shares their ethics and values.

Livestock agriculture needs to talk about our commitment to doing the right thing - our commitment to values and ethics not just science. Our industry is strong in science. We have plenty of evidence to demonstrate we're doing the right thing, but we rely too much on that language. We need to reengage the public on a values basis.

The most important job is to communicate in a way that helps people have trust in what we say and do. Too often

livestock producers take for granted that rural neighbors know and understand who they are and what they do.

Agriculture can no longer take this for granted. Agriculture continues to change and evolve and still most of the people in the United States today are not involved in farming and ranching.

Americans know very little about where their food comes from today. What they want is permission to believe that what we are doing is consistent with their values and ethics. Telling our story to consumers may move to the point where we have to show people what is taking place on our farms. Unfortunately the perception is that when we don't show them - we're hiding something.

That said, there clearly remain legitimate reasons, from disease prevention to biosecurity, not to allow unfettered access to farms and ranches.

Livestock production or animal agriculture in the most affluent country in the world is faced with special challenges and opportunities. Among those challenges is that Americans spend such a small percentage of their income on food that they can demand food where

they want it, when they want it, in the proportion they want it.

Many food stores and food retailers have announced implementation of third-party verification measures to ensure the animals from which food products are derived were treated humanely. In the near future, customers will demand third-party verification and, if it doesn't exist, the store providing the food is not going to be credible with the public.

Agriculture can win this battle for the hearts and minds of consumers. Farmers and ranchers must remember whom they are trying to influence. Customers and consumers need to hear from livestock producers.

It is not productive for the agriculture community to attack activist groups. Instead, agriculture must retake its rightful position as the people in charge of ensuring the humane treatment of animals.

Agriculture must inform people we share their concerns and we work hard every day to make sure our animals are treated fairly and humanely. Follow that by sharing with them how we meet our obligations to the humane treatment of the animals on our farms.

John Schlageck is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. Born and raised on a diversified farm in northwestern Kansas, his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.

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