

Budget cuts will only be a drop in the bucket

On the Prairie Dog
Steve Haynes



So, at nearly the final hour, Congress and the president reach agreement on a budget compromise that will save the economy.

We are not yet out of the woods. The agreement calls for cuts of \$2.5 trillion, which sounds like a lot of money, but that's not enough to balance the budget. It will take real structural change to do that.

The deal is a start, but only a start. The first billion or so is the low-hanging fruit. It comes from capping all spending except the so-called entitlements – Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, government pensions – at 2012 levels.

That is not a spending cut, in other words; it's just limiting the formerly unchecked growth in the budget.

In fact, \$2.5 trillion in cuts over 10 years averages out to just \$250 billion per year, while the country faces a projected deficit just this year of \$1.645 trillion. The government is borrowing 40 percent of what it will spend this year, and \$250 billion won't begin to change that.

It's pretty easy to see, we've got a long ways to go until we can balance the budget. Congress and the White House will have to find some way to cut another \$1.4 trillion a year.

Part of that is projected to come from growth in the economy, but in the present situation, that's not happening. The government projects the deficit to drop by more than half, to \$650 billion a year, by 2016. That's only a guess, however; spending has been well above growth for years.

A bipartisan committee is to be appointed to craft another \$1.2 trillion in cuts over the next 10 years, to be voted on by fall. But that's just another drop in the bucket, maybe \$120 billion a year.

Still, it's a start. We owe the "Tea Party" people a favor: they went to the brink to show the country how important solving this problem is. Until they did, and it's not been a pleasant experience, neither party paid more than lip service to deficit reduction.

With government spending, everyone wants some, but no one wants to pay. Republicans stand against any tax increase, while Democrats say, simplistically, "tax the rich." Yet one estimate is that the assets of all American billionaires amount to a little more than \$1.3 trillion. We could take everything they had, and still have a \$350 billion deficit this year.

Any approach that includes tax increases will have to include us all. Relying on growth in the economy might work for a while – until the next recession, at least – but eventually, that, too, will fail.

Cuts will have to be deeper, much deeper. What has to happen?

- Most of the budget is tied up in "entitlement" social programs that are dear to Democrats. We will have to let go, not of the programs, but of the way they are planned to grow and grow. That means caps on spending and cuts in the formulas for automatic increases.

But as we've seen the last couple of years, increases in Social Security and other programs have become an "entitlement" in themselves. Supporters cry that retirees "need" this money. But to cap borrowing, we'll have to face reality.

- Tax reform. Sometimes a euphemism for a tax increase, this means rewriting the tax code to make it less complex. But will people let go of favorite deductions, such as the home-mortgage writeoff? Will accounts and tax lawyers block simplification?

- Real cuts, across the board, in programs from defense to farm subsidies. Those who depend on federal spending – and today, who doesn't – will have to suffer. But just as your family has to cut back when bills grow and income shrinks, we'll all have to take a piece of the pain.

None of this is going to be easy. We may have to go to the brink again. But the compromise shows the system, slow and cranky as it is, still works. All sides will have to keep the pressure on to move us toward a sane and rational budget, a less complex and more fair tax policy and – some day, down the road, after the next recession – a chance to reduce the burdensome debt that put us in this hole.

The country will have to take it one step at a time, but this is a – very small – first step. A great deal more effort – and a lot more pain – will be required.

– Steve Haynes



Birthdays make some think of a bucket list

The only thing that has made celebrating another birthday tolerable is the fact that this is my first year with a "Face-Book" birthday.

I didn't know I had that many friends. As far as I'm concerned, an e-card is just as good as a HallMark. And, I can read and re-read my birthday wishes as many times as I want. Plus, I get to see my friends' faces at the same time.

Jim apologized for not getting me a card. I told him he could pull one out of the many cards he's given me over the years (yes, I've saved them) and re-cycle it. I said, "I'll never know the difference."

As I age (gracefully, I hope), I realize there are many things I have not yet experienced. I don't have a formal "bucket list"; just a few mental notes. I always wanted to be blonde. But, was too chicken to bleach my almost-black hair. Now, it's silver and blonde doesn't sound so appealing anymore.

Forget about riding in a hot air balloon; that never did make my list. There's no way to control it. But, ever since I saw the movie about the girl who trains a flock of wild geese she raised to fly beside her in a parasail, I've wanted to fly one of those contraptions. A local farmer friend has one and I see him flying. That still looks fun.

I have gone white water rafting and don't need to do that again. But, I would love a lazy, innertube float trip down a river. If you could promise there wouldn't be any snakes, turtles or fish in the water with me. I could half-way check that off because I did do a water park with my granddaughter, Taylor, and we floated on the Lazy River ride.

Out Back

Carolyn Plotts



China, India and Africa are fascinating places I would love to see. China because I've read all of Pearl Buck's books and have a mental picture; India because I can't begin to imagine millions and millions of people; and Africa because it still sounds so wild.

My nephew, Kirk, just returned from his umpteenth trip abroad. I would love to have him as a tour guide anytime. His travelogues made it all sound so interesting and he's never afraid to try something new. He speaks French fluently and perhaps a little Spanish; however, because English is fast becoming the universal language, the language barrier might not be so great.

Driving fast used to be one of my many faults. Age, however, has brought a certain perspective and caution to my driving. I drive the limit, but, not over. Still, I always wanted to drive a really suped-up hotrod on a track. You know, that whole power thing and to see just how fast you could go.

Some of my "bucket list" dreams are possible; some are best left as dreams, like the race car thing. I think it's good to have dreams and aspirations. Nothing would ever happen if we didn't look forward to new experiences; new people, new places. No matter your age, I hope life still holds excitement; purpose; plea-

sure; and, most all, fun.

-ob-

Taylor's stay ended way too soon. We were busy. Perhaps too busy. I'm not sure how many really fun things we did with her. The fair, of course, swimming with friends, watching a friend's baby, making her cake for the fair (blue ribbon, I might add), and lots of reading. Taylor is the kind of kid who blooms wherever she's planted. Maybe we didn't "peg-out" the excitement meter but, I think she had a good time.

Over the weekend we met her mom at the halfway point and had a good visit during the "swap". My other daughter, Halley, came along and they celebrated my birthday a day early. I can add a new lead rooster to my collection of chickens; a cross magnet for the fridge; and a beautiful pashmina (a shawl or stole) to my wardrobe. Plus they took me to my favorite seafood restaurant and we gorged ourselves on shrimp, lobster, scallops and crab legs.

-ob-

Others don't always see the humor in things the way my daughters and I do. We might be laughing ourselves silly and someone else will say, "I don't get it."

That's okay. We do. And, I could try to tell you about the hysterical time we had driving to get an ice cream cone after our huge meal. And, I would laugh so hard I wouldn't be able to get the words out. And, you would think I was cracked. And, somehow, it wouldn't sound nearly as funny as it was. So, guess it was just one of those things where you just had to be there.

Ways to protect yourself against burglary and theft

Insight

John Schlageck

In years past, most homes in rural Kansas were never locked. In fact, if there was a key around the house, few family members knew about it.

After living in a larger community for several years, I'd automatically lock my car without thinking whenever I used to visit my parents in rural Sheridan County.

The first few times my dad saw me do this he scolded me like I was still his boy of 12.

"What in the world are you doing?" Dad would ask. "Who in the devil do you think is going to drive away with that car of yours out here?"

Unfortunately, times change. Like their city cousins, farmers and rural homes are increasingly being burglarized.

In farm thefts and vandalism, mailboxes head the list as favorite targets of vandals and thieves. Cars, windows and signs are also frequently damaged or destroyed.

As in town and cities, stereos, televisions, computers, cameras, appliances and small objects such as jewelry, hand tools and guns are stolen in rural home burglaries. These items are readily converted to cash, and represent most sought after burglary items.

Farm machinery, automobiles and livestock aren't beyond the scope of thieves in rural Kansas today.

easily forced.

- *Place exterior lights in a strategic spot outside the house.

- *Interior lighting is also important. Keep the living room and bathroom light on all the time whether you are home or not. Inexpensive timers are useful for turning various lights on or off.

- *Install a wide-angle viewer in your door to allow you to recognize all visitors.

- *Mark all your possessions with an engraving or invisible marking pen.

- *Whenever you're going on a trip for more than a day or two, let your neighbors know about your plans. They'll be happy to swing by your home a couple times a day and they'll also know you're not there and call the police if they believe things aren't on the up and up.

Remember, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

Don't be any easy target for thieves and burglars on your home, farm or ranch. Follow these time-tested methods for avoiding potential heartache.

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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