MANDIN



The Senate addresses bills put before them

Friday marked the deadline for all committee work for the 2014 legislative session. The Senate consolidated a majority of the week's floor debate to Tuesday, allowing committees ample time to finish their work before the deadline.

We worked 25 bills on Tuesday, all making it out of the chamber except for one - SB 320, which concerns the Medical Advisory Council of the Board of Emergency Medical Services. It would Senate Doings Sen. Ralph **Ostmeyer**

have authorized the board to issue subpoenas and investigate violations. The majority of members were concerned with expanding the board's authority beyond what is currently outlined by statue.

The next stage of the session is mainly reserved for the House and Senate to meet in conference committees. This is the process by which differences in bills are discussed and negotiated.

Members from each chamber present their bill and position along with what they like and don't like about the other chamber's bill. The top three members of each committee represent their respective chamber's position in the negotiations. When both sides believe they have an equitable agreement, they submit their report back to their respective chambers and each body votes on the report.

If it passes both chambers, it is then submitted to the governor for his signature or veto. If either house rejects the agreement, they go back to conference and resume the negotiations. The conference committee process is followed for each bill with any differences from what one or the other chamber passed.

In the final two weeks of the regular session, focus will turn entirely to floor debate and conference committees. After April 4, the Legislature will break on first adjournment. We will return to our districts for the majority of April to visit with you on the key issues of the legislative session. Then we will return in May to consider any bills that were vetoed by the governor and finish any lingering discussions on the education budget, if necessary.

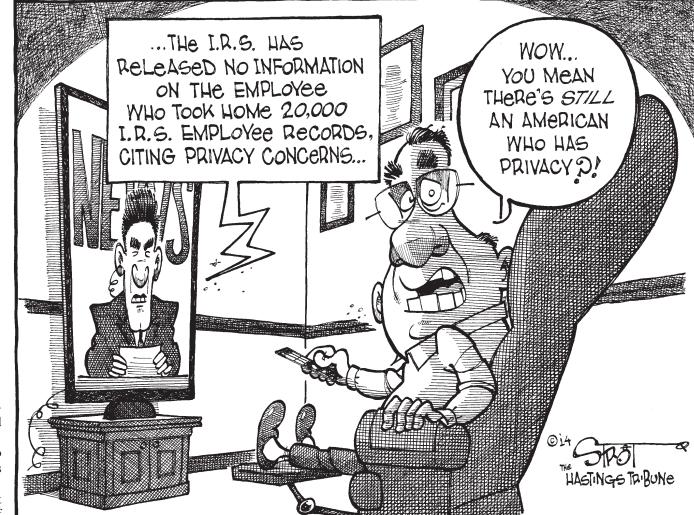
Highlights of the week

Mortgage Registration Fee: In what was anticipated to be a long debate on the floor this week, the Senate passed a bill which will phase out the Mortgage Registration Fee. Substitute Senate Bill 298, over the next five years, will slowly phase out a tax imposed on homebuyers using a loan to purchase property.

Most simply, the tax penalizes those unable to purchase a home with cash or through a farm credit organization. In fact, some referred to this existing practice as "the poor man's tax" because of its unequal affect on home buyers in different financial situations. In order to even the playing field, the law would need to be changed to apply to all home buyers or simply eliminate the tax. Our choice was to eliminate the tax.

Originally, the bill wiped out the tax within a year of becoming law, but after testimony from many rural county officials concerned with the impact on their operations, the authors of the bill struck a compromise to phase the tax out over five years.

During floor debate, an amendment was adopted to split the fee between the county treasurers and registers to offset costs endured by treasurers to collect the filing fees. Because of these adjustments, many of the smaller counties that rely on the tax to operate these offices will actually generate more money now as a result of the compromise.



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Sunburned neck, chapped lips, dirty fingernails, gritty skin and sand in my hair. It was great! I loved it. Another Mexico mission trip is in the books.

Jim and I both say, "A mission trip is the hardest fun you'll ever have." It's true. Even if it were for someone you knew, not many people would endure the long, hot hours; the hard work; the lack of some modern conveniences; the frustration of not understanding the language; and pay for the privilege that mission trip volunteers willingly and eagerly accept. Now, imagine doing that for someone you don't know, in a foreign country.

The team we worked with was from Tonganoxie in northeast Kansas. It was made up of seven adults and 13 high school kids. Something was perhaps welcoming the team to their facility. It read, "Bienvenidos (Welcome), Tomganoxie." Everyone had to take a picture of the sign. My Spanish is improving, but it's not there yet. We were blessed to have a woman, Liz, on our team who was totally fluent and able to translate everything from children's Bible stories to the Mexican minister's prayers and blessings for the team.



Funny things always

happen with misunderstandings of the language. During the Vacation Bible School held every afternoon by a few of the team members, Liz told the children, "Escuche! (Listen!)" and then in Spanish told them to move back a little so everyone would have room.

The next day, another team member and adult sponsor, Monisha, was trying to get the VBS started before Liz lost in the translation because our host was there. The children were again church in Mexico had made a sign crowded around the table and Monisha thought "escuche" was similar to "scoot" and meant to scoot over. She kept repeating, "Escuche, escuche!" The children were listening, but they didn't move. We originally thought we were building for a single mom with four children, but it turned out to be for a couple, Jose and Maria and their two children, Cesar and AdriAnna. Maria was very quiet, always deferring to

Jose. Until it came to the paint color. Jim and I take left over paint with us and this year, it was several partial cans of white, off white, light tan and one can of dark hunter green. I found a clean five-gallon bucket and poured in all the light colors, then started adding the green a little at a time. I had a nice minty green stirred up when I asked Jose for his approval. He spoke very good English and said, "No. Ask Maria. She never likes the colors I pick."

So, even in Mexico, men are not allowed to choose paint colors without a permission slip from their wife.

Jim celebrated his 70th birthday on our way to Mexico. But he works like he's 40 and is still able to show the kids a thing or two. It might be getting a little harder to get moving in the mornings, but we know volunteers who are much older than we are, so don't say,

Background checks for teachers: This week, the Senate passed a bill 30-4 requiring school districts to conduct finger print and background checks for teachers who have been recently hired or seeking to renew their license. The checks would be conducted by the Kansas Bureau of Investigation. The bill would also require districts to develop drug screening for teachers. Under a provision in the bill, districts would need to provide educational programs for employees testing positive for drug and alcohol issues.

During floor debate, an amendment was adopted outlining penalties for legislators testing positive for drug use. As you'll recall from last year, the Legislature passed a measure that would require drug testing for members based on reasonable suspicion. The bill, however, did not clearly define repercussions for a legislator failing a drug test. The amendment detailed a legislator who fails a drug test would have their pay and expenses suspended until they attended a drug rehab program. If they failed a second drug test, pay and expenses would be suspended for a year and a third time their compensation would be cut off permanently. The amendment passed unanimously.

Time is quickly running out for the 2014 session. With the legislature rapidly approaching the last deadlines, I encourage you to stay informed of the issues we're discussing. Committee schedules, bills and other helpful information can be accessed at www.kslegislature.org. Do not hesitate to contact me with your thoughts, concerns and suggestions. I always enjoy hearing from my constituents and appreciate the perspective from those outside the Statehouse.

Reach Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer (R-Grinnell) by mail at State Capitol, 300 SW 10th Street, Room 136-E, Topeka, Kan. 66612, phone at (785) 296-7399 or e-mail at



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STAFF





'I'm too old.'

Everyone can do something. Whether it's abroad, here in this country, in your town or in your neighborhood. If everyone would do something wouldn't that be wonderful?

Years ago there was a television program featuring a Catholic priest. His motto was, "If everyone lit just one little candle what a bright world this would be."

Fire remains a vital management tool

Every spring, the ritual continues. Viewed up close or at a distance, prairie fires are riveting. Across the vast, open grasslands we call the Flint Hills, fires can be seen for miles. The flames lick at the blue Kansas sky as the brown, dry grass crinkles, cracks and bursts into orange.

But these fires aren't recent phenomena and they aren't strictly for the viewing pleasure of highway travelers. Long before civilization invaded the prairie, lightning storms ignited fires and the prairie was charred restoring the health of the native grasses.

Native Americans were the first practitioners of prescribed fires. They used the fire to attract buffalo to the new grass for easier hunting.

The controlled burning of the tallgrass prairie in east-central Kansas is an annual event that mimics nature's match. It has become a tradition, part of the culture of the communities and the people who inhabit this region of our state. Without fire, the Flint Hills woodlands and the livestock industry lose a fantastic resource.

This annual pasture burning only occurs for a few days each year. It is not a drawn-out procedure that lasts for weeks. However, most years weather conditions dictate the length of the burning seasons.



Insight John Schlageck

Not every cattleman burns his pastures every year; instead, individual ranchers and landowners survey and decide each spring, which pastures will produce a healthier, lush grass for livestock after burning. Often neighbors plan and burn together, giving them more hands to ensure a safe, controlled burn.

Spring burning is one of the easiest and most effective methods of controlling the eastern red cedar. There's nothing better for the eradication of this extremely invasive tree than to run a fire through the grassland every two or three years.

Kansas State University experts recommend burning take place when wind speeds are between 5 and 15 miles per hour, relative humidity is from 40 to 70 percent and temperatures fall in the range of 55 to 80 degrees.

Landowners in all counties must notify local officials prior to planned, controlled burns. This notification is a

key to preventing prescribed fires turning into accidental wildfires and ensuring burning is allowed under the existing conditions.

In 2011, the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) completed the Kansas Flint Hills Smoke management plan. The plan is intended to help alleviate urban air quality issues generated by prescribed burning in the Flint Hills. Coupled with the associated web tools, it should help producers make better decisions when planning and implementing prescribed fires.

You can reach this website at http:// www.ksfire.org>www.ksfire.org.

The real crux of this plan is that the Flint Hills ranching community's actions to control smoke remain primarily voluntary. Refer to the above website to review copies of the plan.

Farmers and ranchers are tuned into ever changing weather conditions and will continue to keep prescribed fire in the tall grass prairies confined to a minimum time period. This process is part of the culture of the rural communities that dot the Flint Hills region.

Prairie fires help Mother Nature rejuvenate the grasses that carpet her fertile hills. That means good things for cattlemen, for agriculture, for rural communities and the Kansas economy.

Letters to the Editor and Thumbs Up: e-mail dpaxton@nwkansas.com or to write 215 S. Kansas Ave.

