

Government road and bridge funds in crisis

The Obama administration is pushing Congress to solve Washington's latest money crisis before it's too late: the country will run out of federal money for road and bridge work by late August, pretty much day after tomorrow in D.C. time.

The times have not been kind to the Highway Trust Fund, fueled as it is by the federal taxes on gasoline, diesel fuel and other road-related items. The fund pays 80 to 90 percent of the cost of most road and bridge projects, or used to.

Under government mandates, automakers are turning out smaller, more efficient cars. To save money, people have been driving less as fuel prices have risen. And, again at government "urging," individuals and businesses are buying more "alternative-fueled" vehicles, including electric or hybrid cars and trucks and trucks fueled by propane or natural gas.

All of that adds up to less tax money going into the trust fund, even while the need for new road and major repairs mounts.

The last few years, Congress has been supplementing the fund with general revenues because no one wants to do what needs to be done, which is raise the fuel taxes. That needs to happen, because the fund can't keep up anymore.

At the price of fuel today compared to when the taxes were last raised, no one would notice much, and an increase would be a good deal for everyone, especially those who drive. These are among the few taxes where you know your money will be spent to your benefit.

However, raising taxes is one of those "third-rail" issues in Washington: No one wants to touch the high-voltage carrier, especially in an election year.

It's far more likely Congress will patch up the trust fund to get by until next year, then go through the whole thing again.

The alternative would cost the country billions: states would have to put off bidding on road and bridge repairs until the fund had money, throwing thousands of construction workers off the job. The whole economy could slow down, putting the brakes on the recover.

Congress seems to thrive on crisis, deadlines and emergencies. Hardly anything gets done until the last minute. In an election year, make that the last second. But with our infrastructure crumbling around us and the economy in the balance, no one can afford a lack of action.

Let's hope this is one of those times when leaders of both parties will realize that something has to be done and come together to do just that. While our money is on a temporary fix rather than the tax increase the country needs, that would be preferable to seeing the well run dry.

— Steve Haynes



Appreciating pioneer toughness

And so, it begins.

Last week I admitted to wearing my clothes backwards and inside-out. This week I kept saying that May was almost over.

Jim has begun saying, "Keys in the refrigerator. Keys in the refrigerator." In reference to the public service message on television advising people that the early signs of Alzheimer's may already be visible.

My oldest daughter, Halley, sent an e-mail saying she was glad no one was hurt during the recent storms and then told me to check out a web-site address she had included. That I would like it. I clicked on the link and it was for Shady Rest Elder Care.

Perhaps it is true. "Be nice to your children, because they pick out your nursing home."

-ob-

Jim and I got a little taste of what it may have been like to be pioneers on the Kansas prairie. It was a real little taste...and I'm sure glad we didn't have to eat the whole bite.

Jim was hired to build a restroom in the city park of our little town. A side-

Out Back

Carolyn Plotts



job to that was to pour a concrete sidewalk connecting the facility to the existing sidewalk.

The grass at the park is thick and lush with a deep root system. The prospect of hand-digging the pathway was not one Jim wanted to consider. But being the resourceful guy he is, Jim devised a plan using an old sod plow that had belonged to his grandfather (and perhaps his great-grandfather), the four-wheeler and, of course, me.

Just like on the gardening shows, Jim took a paint can and marked the area that needed to be removed. He had me position the four-wheeler on the mark while he hooked the plow to the hitch. On his signal, I let off the brake and the four-wheeler began to inch forward. Jim put all his weight on the plow to

aim it downward, under the roots. Sometimes, he would go too deep and the four-wheeler would buck and spin its tires. Sometimes, the plow would not be angled correctly and it would come out of the ground. I would have to stop, put the four-wheeler in reverse and Jim would pull the plow backwards to take another run at it. The plow did work, though and with only four passes, the path was cleared.

When I think of my grandfathers, both Kelley and Davison, I think they must have been made of pretty tough stuff. We had a gas-powered engine; they had a team of stubborn mules. We only had about 50 feet of sod to remove; they had hundreds and hundreds of feet. We could go home and rest in air-conditioned comfort; they didn't even have a shady tree.

I used to think I had been born in the wrong century. I envied the pioneers and their way of life. Now, I'm glad to have all the modern conveniences.

Perhaps the best thing about the "good 'ole days" is that they're gone.

Remembering the big old red barns

When I was a youngster, one of my favorite places to play on a cold winter day was my Uncle Joe and Aunt Anna's weathered red barn. Uncle Bernie had one too and it was also a must stop when we went to see our cousins.

This warm, cluttered sanctuary served up a smorgasbord of playing opportunities. It was also a relaxing place, especially if it was raining or snowing outside and the weather was too bad to work. During winter, time usually wasn't as pressing as it was during fall or spring planting, wheat harvest, haying or crop cultivation time.

About the time I was growing up, the popularity of tractors marked the end for many barns. Some were taken down while others were abandoned or replaced with Quonset huts made of plywood and galvanized steel.

We didn't have a beautiful red barn on our farm in Sheridan County. Instead, my dad built a machine shed and what we called "The Big Shed." It was 90-feet long and housed our tractors, grain drills, trucks and other farm equipment. When we had a bumper wheat crop, all the machinery was cleared out and it was filled with golden grain.

Why were so many barns painted red?

Probably the biggest reason was the ferric oxide, which was used to create red paint. It was cheap and the most readily available for farmers.

The wooden barns that dotted the prairie countryside weren't generally a good example of housekeeping. In

Insight

John Schlageck



my uncle's barn, old, dusty horse blankets and cobweb-covered horse collars hung from wooden pegs or rusty nails. Hay tongs also competed for space. Here and there a busted plow stock leaned against a wooden wall. Some barn corners were crowded with pitchforks and an occasional come-along. Tangled, broken bailing twine littered the damp dirt floor mingling with the smells of rusting iron, manure and mildewed leather.

As youngsters, the hay mow (rhymes with cow) or hayloft was where our parents searched for us when we were hiding in the barn. While there were always wooden steps or a ladder to crawl up to this upper floor, we'd try to find new routes to the top. We'd risk life and limb crawling up the side of the barn grabbing onto anything that would hold our body weight or lassoing a post or board above and climbing the rope, hand over hand, to the loft.

Once inside this cavernous space, we'd marvel at the wooden pattern of the rafters high over our heads. We'd yell out at the pigeons or starlings who tried to invade our private world of kid adventures.

If there were bales or scattered hay

outside one of the two large doors at either end of the hayloft, we'd often make the 15-20 foot plunge into the soft landing.

Hay was hoisted up and into the barn through these doors by a system of pulleys and a trolley that ran along a track attached to the top ridge of the barn. Trap doors in the floor allowed animal feed to be dropped into the mangers for the animals. As youngsters of nine, 10 or 11, these doors also made a perfect getaway during hide and seek as we jumped through and made our escape.

Exploring the tack room with all of the bridles and saddles was my favorite. Before I could ride, I'd struggle to take one of the saddles off the wall so I could place it on a sawhorse and pretend to ride like my hero, Roy Rogers.

And finally, who could forget the many idioms we heard about barns as children. You remember, "You couldn't hit the broad side of a barn." "Were you born in a barn?" and "Your barn door is open."

Today, many of the old fashioned barns we knew as children are gone. They're mainly memories when folks with farming backgrounds visit at reunions or weddings. Still, these memories provide a warm glow of yesteryear.

Remember that bitter cold day in January of '61 when the winter winds whistled under the eaves of Aunt Anna's barn and the icy rain played tic-tac against the cobweb-blotched windows....



Dear Editor,
Since the Chamber of Commerce is not going to have fireworks, I feel there should be no fireworks sold in the city limits of the City of Norton.
August Muehe



Thumbs up to the Lions and the city for starting the Busch field upgrades! It's going to be great when it is finished. E-mailed in.

Thumbs up to the Norton Pool. It is terrific! There were community people of all ages having fun and enjoying the pool. Good Job Norton! Brought in.

A Big Thumbs Up to the City Crews for the excellent, thorough Clean Up after the Storm. Great Job!! E-mailed in.

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

Remember there is no charge for rendering a Thumbs Up. Thumbs Up are meant to give recognition for a positive person or event in the community. Also remember all Letters to the Editor must be signed.

THE NORTON TELEGRAM

OFFICE HOURS:
8 a.m. - 5:30 p.m. Mon.-Thur.
8 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. Friday
Phone: (785) 877-3361
Fax: (785) 877-3732

STAFF

Dana Paxton..... General Manager
Advertising Director
dpaxton@nwkansan.com
Dick Boyd..... Blue Jay Sports
nortontelegram@nwkansan.com
Michael Stephens..... Reporter
Managing Editor
mstephens@nwkansan.com
Shylo Paxton..... Society Editor
spaxton@nwkansan.com
Vicki Henderson..... Computer Production
Marcia Shelton..... Office Manager

E-mail:
nortontelegram@nwkansan.com

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