

Opinion



Free Press Viewpoint

Don't send the bill to the properties

The problem funding Colby Community College's proposed wellness center is convincing the people who won't benefit from it that it is still worth paying for.

Plans are to increase property taxes to pay for about \$15 million of the \$20 million needed for construction. The college will take care of the remainder. Depending upon value of the property, it's safe to say property taxes will go up \$100 a year.

How many Thomas County residents are in the position to pay that much more? Western Kansas is losing population and the population that stays is getting older. Many economic trends state older people don't spend as much as younger folk. Most older people don't want to spend more either. Increases in health care costs and energy are a challenge to everyone, let alone older people. Don't forget, the days of \$1.25 a gallon gasoline are over.

Kansas' property tax rates have become legislative-approved robbery. The college board is taking risks wanting to increase property taxes even more — especially for people who have no connection or interest with the college and won't vote for it.

The college board must promote the center as something that includes its athletic programs — not the sole reason for it. That may help.

The more ways the proposed center can be used, the better, and the more ways Colby and the college can get increase exposure. The college should think way beyond basketballs and volleyballs.

Imagine if an agricultural show or conference was to be held in Colby and some of the tractor dealers wanted a place to display the newest model of combine indoors. Where are you going to put it in Colby? Nowhere. The center must include an oversized garage-like door so large items can easily be moved in and out of the facility.

Will the center be ideal for an extravagant stage and lighting apparatus for a concert or other large production?

An economic study about the impact the proposed center leads to the question why a sales tax increase can't help pay for the building.

Sure, all Thomas County residents will pay sales tax, but if the center brings in the people like it is speculated to do, those people will help pay the bill easing some of the load on the local residents.

Look at how many people Colby High's Orange and Black basketball tournament brings in for multiple days. Look at how many people patronize our gas stations, restaurants and hotels throughout the year. Visitors to our town know they will pay sales taxes on their purchases.

If the college wants people outside of its service area to come to the college and Wellness Center, let them help pay for it too.

— John Van Nostrand is publisher of the Colby Free Press.

About those letters . . .

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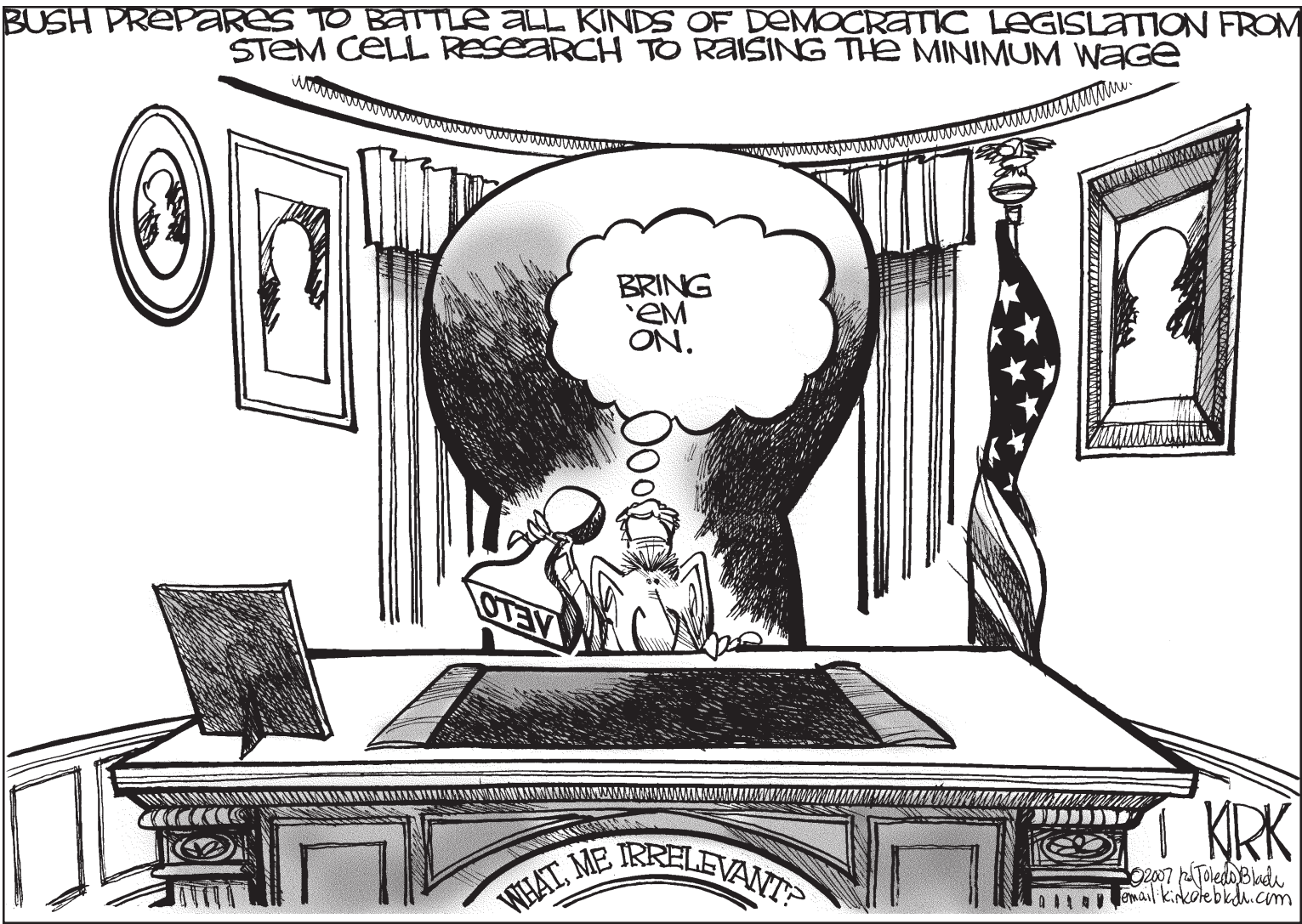
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Improving health care coverage

By Kim Moore, president, United Methodist Health Ministry Fund, Hutchinson

Why we all lose if securing health care coverage for all Kansans becomes a politicized, polarizing issue.

In her State of the State message, Governor Sebelius urged commitment "to the goal that all Kansans will have health insurance" and challenged legislators to work with her, the Health Policy Authority, and stakeholders to develop this year a plan to achieve coverage for all Kansans.

Although expressing uncertainty about what might be involved in such a plan, most legislators signaled support for this important concept that all Kansans should have access through health insurance to the health care they need.

There is a growing recognition that it is critical to achieve coverage reaching all Kansans. This is not a fanciful goal but one that is essential if we desire healthy families and a productive workforce. And one that is necessary to prevent financial disasters for thousands of Kansans due to health care expenses.

Practical, Realistic Idea

The Governor's idea is not a liberal or conservative or libertarian idea. It is good old-fashioned Kansas pragmatism, reflecting the reality that something comprehensive must be done about health care coverage and costs.

Last year two studies, prepared by The Access Project with funding from the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund, produced new information about the growing problem for Kansans in paying for health care and insurance. Among the users of Kansas community health centers who were surveyed, 63 percent reported currently owing money for medical bills and nearly half of those with medical debt delayed a doctor's visit and nearly 4 in 10 delayed a dental visit.

Even more surprising were survey results from Kansas farmers.

Twenty-nine percent of those surveyed under age 65 had medical debt with the median amount of medical debt reported at \$2,500. Ninety-five percent had health insurance. Apparently their insurance was inadequate to protect against medical debt (we call this "underinsured"). We know from other studies that 280,000-300,000 Kansans are without health insurance at any given time.

All of us at risk

Increasingly, we are all at risk of falling into the financial and health quagmire of no or inadequate health insurance. The health insurance system is riddled with potential problems for any

Other Viewpoints

• From Pens of Kansans

of us.

You can fall out of coverage because:

- 1) you have a pre-existing condition and need to secure new coverage;

- 2) you retire before age 65 and before Medicare eligibility;

- 3) you become disabled;

- 4) you are eliminated from your family's health policy because you turned age 24, got married, or quit going to college;

- 5) you get divorced and can't afford continuing coverage premiums;

- 6) you were terminated from employment;

- 7) your employer dropped its health insurance; or

- 8) you have Medicare Part D prescription coverage and fell into the "dough-nut hole" now owing 100% of your prescription bills.

Should lack of access to health care and threats to your personal financial situation depend on occurrences like these?

Bi-partisan Solutions

The governor is providing us with an opportunity to give serious attention to a better way — coverage for all Kansans — Other states, at least five so far, have confronted the problem and embarked on similar processes to build more comprehensive coverage for their citizens. These processes have been bi-partisan and have taken the best ideas from the three prominent directions of health care reform. These three directions can be described as:

- 1) personal responsibility including creating incentives for improved health behaviors and individual health insurance coverage;

- 2) limited government expansion to insure low wage workers and other uniquely affected persons have access to affordable health care; and

- 3) market-based strategies such as a re-invigorated market for health insurance, especially for individuals and small businesses.

What is coming from plan development processes in other states is the central understanding that it takes ideas from all parts of this ideological continuum to craft a comprehensive,

affordable and workable plan.

Hopefully, the process in Kansas will be inclusive of many proposals and rely on new statistical modeling methods to determine real coverage levels obtainable from elements of the plan and the comparative costs and savings.

There are significant potential savings in a system covering everyone — for example, more timely treatment in the most cost-effective place — which can be used to offset some of the costs of a well-designed plan.

Action, not just sympathy

For many years, Kansas political leaders in response to growing concerns and complaints about health care access, cost and quality have joined their constituents in bemoaning the problems. Often, they have offered words of sympathy but few ideas for action to make real differences.

Focusing on the goal of health care coverage for all Kansans can produce new, dramatic results as other states have shown.

Our individual health and our Kansas economy are making this new vision into one which pragmatic Kansans see as essential. Hopefully, our leaders will be committed to dealing with the full magnitude of this issue and focusing serious attention on this opportunity. Kansas can be an early adopter of a unique health care reform plan, informed by techniques being pioneered in other states. Our citizens deserve it.

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The Health Ministry Fund is a grantmaking organization seeking to improve the health of all Kansans through strategic and collaborative philanthropy guided by Christian principles. Its Board of Trustees in December adopted a goal of achieving universal health care for all Kansans.



Patty Decker

• Deep Thoughts

Colby Free Press Editor Patty Decker and her column will return in February.

Another reason not to vote?

From the Lawrence Journal-World

A proposal to require Kansas voters to present a photo identification at the polls may be trying to solve a problem that doesn't exist — and perhaps creating some new problems in the process.

State Sen. Tim Huelkamp, R-Fowler, is chairman of the Senate Elections and Local Government Committee and has proposed the ID measure in response, at least in part, to concerns that illegal immigrants are voting in Kansas elections. Although there is no proof that is happening, he said, requiring identification would "enhance the confidence of the citizens of Kansas in our election process."

Preserving voter confidence is an important goal, especially in light of reports of voter fraud and concern about the vulnerability of computerized voting systems. Every effort should be made to have a secure, reliable voting system for all eligible voters, but the measure under consideration may make voting more inconvenient without enhancing voter security.

Currently voters must present identification either when they register or the first time they vote. The process must be repeated if the voter moves. It's not a foolproof system, but there isn't any evidence of widespread illegal voting in the state.

Perhaps some illegal immigrants are coming to the polls, but it seems unlikely that many people living in the state illegally would risk detection by trying to register or cast a ballot. ...

On the surface of it, requiring a photo ID doesn't seem too much to ask of people who want to vote. Voting is a great privilege. Unfortunately, it's a privilege that many people already choose to bypass.

With a statewide turnout in the November general election of about 52 percent of registered voters, it doesn't seem like Kansas should be looking for new reasons to turn people away from the polls.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce

Tinsley

