

Opinion



Other Viewpoints

Coal-fired power is blown away by windmill trend

As the Kansas Legislature keeps trying to force approval of two new coal-fired power plants near Holcomb, other states are moving in the opposite direction.

Yet most of our lawmakers don't seem to notice or care....

As they press full steam ahead, other states are backing away from coal plants because of rising construction costs, frozen financing and the likelihood of federal carbon taxes.

In the past 2 1/2 years, plans for more than 80 coal plants have either been voluntarily withdrawn or denied permits by state regulators, *The New York Times* reported.

So far this year, Montana, Arizona, Pennsylvania, Ohio, South Dakota, New Mexico, Nevada and Iowa have scrapped or put on hold plans for coal plants....

Coal plants are still being built — 28 were under construction this year — but the trend is toward delaying or canceling plants because of concerns about climate-change regulations and escalating costs, according to a report by the National Energy Technology Laboratory.

Meanwhile, what's booming is wind. Last year, states added a record 8,300 megawatts in wind energy. Kansas has opened 650 megawatts of wind energy capacity in the past 15 months but has barely tapped its potential.

Supporters of the Holcomb plant expansion are correct that there is "regulatory uncertainty" — though it's not due to Kansas Department of Health and Environment's permit denial, as they claim. The uncertainty is about when and in what form federal carbon taxes will be implemented. And that uncertainty, along with reduced financing and increased construction costs, is why other states are cautious about coal.

As J. Wayne Leonard, chief executive of Entergy, a Fortune 500 power company, told USA Today: "When you look at the risks around the coal plant at this time, it's very hard to justify."

But try telling that to some Kansas lawmakers.

—*The Wichita Eagle via The Associated Press*

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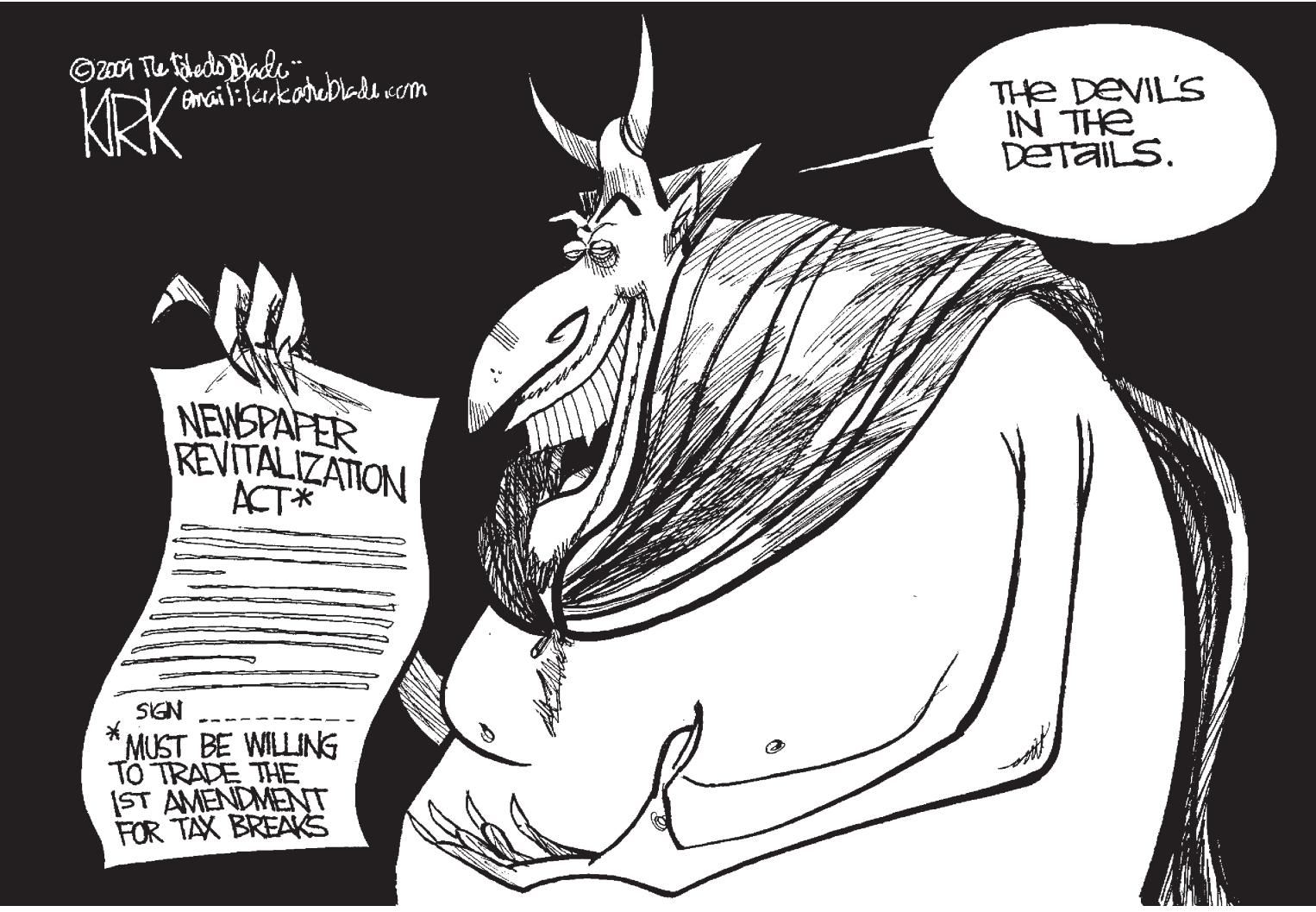
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It's all in the numbers

Gregory L. Schneider

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Did you know that the Kansas state budget for 2010 is balanced? You didn't? Then you must not have received the memo the governor's office issued Feb. 27, a few days before President Barack Obama nominated her as secretary of Health and Human Services.

As she prepared to make her way down the yellow brick road to the Emerald City (also known as Washington, D.C.), Gov. Kathleen Sebelius gleefully declared that the infusion of federal funds from the recently passed American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (the Orwellian name for Massive Handout) would allow Kansas to avoid any additional cuts in state spending over the \$600 million the governor is leaving the legislature to cut for next year.

How responsible of her. Except for the gaping \$600 million deficit, the budget is now balanced.

"My recommendations for the fiscal year 2010 budget already include over \$600 million in additional cuts...." the governor said. "These efforts, combined with the state stabilization funds included in the Federal Recovery Act, allow us to pass the fiscal year 2010 budget recommendations without making deeper cuts to those programs which ensure the long term health of our great state."

How will the federal money be spent? Sebelius proposed four areas. One is Medicaid, which will receive a 6 percent increase in federal money. Kansas will receive an additional \$103 million in fiscal year 2009, \$200 million in fiscal year 2010 and \$102 million in fiscal year 2011. But what happens then? If the additional federal funds leads to increased Medicaid recipients and then federal money dries up, is the state prepared to spend even more on Medicaid, or to kick vulnerable people off Medicaid roles?

There is "fiscal stabilization" for education as well, an infusion of \$367 million to help maintain "minimum levels of state support for local schools and higher education." There is also \$107 million available for additional spending on special education. All told, the state will get about \$968 million from the federal government over the next three years.

Kansas legislators are not really free to spend the money as they want. There are stipulations they must meet in order for the money to come to Kansas. Higher education funding must be restored to \$829 million (the fiscal year 2008 level) and maintain that way through fiscal year 2011. Per pupil money funding of \$4,400 must be maintained as well through fiscal year 2011.

The federal money will allow Kansas to insure an additional 8,000 children through the expansion of the State Children's Health In-

surance Program, known in Kansas as Health-Wave. And, last but not least, additional money will be available for unemployment benefits, an estimated \$68 million.

These are changes or requirements which the Massive Handout Act forces the state to enact to receive its money. As the governor indicated, "with these budget amendments and statutory changes, the 2010 budget is balanced, ends with money in the bank and does not raise taxes." The latter is true, but little else is as rosy as the governor portrays.

While additional cutting may not be necessary now that federal funds are flooding state coffers, as the governor proposes, what about cuts in the future? The massive infusion of cash to the states only postpones the inevitable. Future legislators and governors will have to curtail their lavish spending, and like the people they serve, live within their means. Politicians have the opportunity to make those hard choices now. The governor, in her parting shot to the state of Kansas, is saying — don't make hard choices. Take the stimulus money. Leave hard choices for another day.

She will be a model citizen of the Emerald City.

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Give the people what they want

While almost every industry today does a less-than-stellar job of living by the motto "the customer is the most important part of business," Kansas farmers and ranchers are one segment that adheres to this philosophy.

Kansas farmers and ranchers have always been willing to adapt to the ever-changing consumer landscape. They approach each year with an open mind and the flexibility to develop new ways of marketing their livestock and crops.

Customers and consumers are driven by changes in personal preferences and increasing income levels. The idea of "give the consumer what he wants" will never ring truer than today.

In today's tough economic times, shoppers are tighter fisted with their money. They want quality, but they also want a good price. Convenience is important. All are major pieces of the buying equation.

Our future agricultural economy will continue to be driven by consumer demand. Consumers become wiser, more savvy every day. Tomorrow's well-informed shopper will want, and demand, more information about how food is produced. It will be up to the farmer and rancher to help provide such information.

Some Kansas farmers have already figured this out and are giving the consumers what they want. Dan and Amy Saunders raise cattle in Jefferson County and market their family's beef in nearby Lawrence and suburban Kansas City. The Saunderses want their customers to know them and their family livestock operation.



John Schlageck

• Insights
Kansas Farm Bureau

As a result, when customers buy the family's beef, they're buying the complete package.

"They're buying us," Amy says. "They're buying a quality product, and they know exactly who produces it."

Consumers must never be viewed as adversaries. Consumers are the folks who buy agricultural products and keep farmers in the business of producing food, fuel and fiber.

As agricultural producers, we can never discount their intelligence. Rather we must seek input from them and — once we understand what their needs are — provide for them.

More than ever before, today's farming and ranching is consumer-driven. Whatever the consumer wants, that's what we are obligated to provide as long as we can do so at a fair price.

As has always been the case, every year, farmers are called upon to become better risk managers, especially as we continue moving into a market and consumer-oriented world arena.

The successful farmer in 2009 and beyond will be the one who manages yield and price risks by knowing exactly what break-even costs of each crop will be. He or she will in-

corporate specific goals that ensure profits and include prudent risk-management strategies.

Flexibility will key future success on the farm. One day soon, farmers will no longer be able to rely on government payments. Farmers must examine sound, new marketing techniques and the latest crop insurance options coming down the pike.

Remember, past performance never guarantees future success. While relying on common sense helps, it will not always make you a successful producer. But becoming a business specialist and understanding who your customers are and marketing your business to them is a prerequisite to continuing in the profession of farming.

John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. He grew up on a diversified farm in northwestern Kansas, and his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.

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