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Other Viewpoints

No easy fix when it comes to college upkeep

Garry Sherrer says waiting to make building repairs only makes the problems more expensive to fix down the line.

Any homeowner knows it, he says, and he's absolutely right.

But putting a new coat of paint on the ol' family ranch is one thing, and fixing dozens of antiquated buildings on college campuses is another one entirely.

That's why it's hard to see how Sherrer, the Kansas Board of Regents chairman, or anyone else can expect the state to do much more than it's currently doing to maintain infrastructure at the Regents universities.

Last week, Sherrer urged the state to make university maintenance an ongoing priority. The regents also unveiled a report showing that the backlog of repairs to buildings had ballooned to \$876 million - up \$57 million from a 2008 internal appraisal.

The unspoken message was that the state isn't keeping up even though \$108 million in state and federal funding has been pumped into maintenance over the past several years.

But where, exactly, would the extra money for repairs come from? The state is already dealing with a \$550 million budget shortfall by reducing funding to public schools, shifting \$200 million out of the transportation program, consolidating agencies and writing off 2,000 unfilled jobs.

Sherrer is right to say university maintenance should be an ongoing priority, but right now there are a lot of priorities and very little money to go around. Let's not forget that the state in recent years has even reduced funding for services to some of its most vulnerable residents, including the disabled and elderly.

So to use his homeowner reference, how many of us would pour money into new siding when we were struggling to buy our kids textbooks and school supplies?

For those of us with ailing children, parents or other family members, how many would spend less on their care in order to increase our budget for home repairs?

Granted, the state should do its best to keep the regents campuses running smoothly. The university system is a vital asset for Kansas, not only in terms of providing educational opportunities for residents but also in generating jobs, innovation and economic development for the state.

Lawmakers have recognized the need for maintenance, approving in 2007 a five-year program providing \$63.7 million for boiler replacements, utility tunnel improvements, water line and electrical equipment upgrades, roofing jobs and disability access projects.

Regents campuses gained an additional \$45.8 million in stimulus package funding for maintenance.

But when economic hardship strikes, it occasionally becomes



"I'M VERY CONCERNED ABOUT PERSONAL PRIVACY ... JUST ASK ALL MY TWITTER FOLLOWERS."

'Goose cult' worships corn pile

They flock to the altar near sunset, arrayed in rows spreading back from the front.

The leaders climb up to survey the rest, looking back over the ranks of supplicants. The congregation, for the most part, just stands and watches.

Occasionally, one from the ranks will step up to the front, as if to testify. He may take a grain of communion; he may not. The worshipers seem mostly to be entranced. As the evening winds down, more acolytes join the back of the crowd.

No one leaves, however, until the show is over.

Some new cult?

No. At least, I don't think so.

But then, I'm not sure if geese have a religion.

If they do, though, it must involve the corn god, for this scene plays out each evening where the McCook co-op has one of several giant piles of corn stored on the ground along the dusty roads south of the rail yards.

When the sun is high, the piles are silent. Only when it dips below the trees do the geese



congregate, dozens and dozens of them. They stand in silent awe, staring at more corn than any of them has ever seen.

You might think they would rush the pile and try to gobble it down, but that never happens. A few geese at a time will reverently peck at it. Most just stay in their ranks, facing the corn.

Oh, a car driving by might set a few in the rear to flight. They will be replaced by the next squadron to drop in, and there are plenty of replacements in McCook's growing goose flock.

When one goose steps onto the pile, the others in the rear will move up.

What are they thinking? Who knows. Geese don't have big brains, so probably not much. From the looks of things, it's somewhere between awe and reverence.

"Just think of all that food...."

None of them looks underfed. That's probably just as well. If they ate too much, the co-op would have to run them off. As it is, the losses must be tolerable.

I think it's just the idea of all that corn. They want to see it, to feel it, to keep an eye on it. Ravenous as geese can be, they're just in no hurry to jump into the pile.

Or, for all I know, maybe they're waiting for some goose bishop to come bless it. I'm sure they'll be bereft when the pile is gone, and the co-op crew is working on them, one by one.

For now, it's quite a show if you happen to be coming or going from McCook in the evening.

Steve Haynes is editor and publisher of The Colby Free Press and president of Nor'West Newspapers. In his spare time, whenever that is, he like to ride and watch trains.

Committees look at state finance

With the second week in the legislature behind us work continued as committees met to address issues and legislation. In the next week or two, bills will start to make their way out of committee and head to the House floor for debate and final vote. I will try to keep you updated.



voters to show a birth certificate, passport, or other proof of citizenship when registering to Rick Billinger vote. First time voters would still be required to show a government-issued photo ID when casting their ballot. The bill would also allow low-income Kansans to get a free ID or birth certificate if they reside in a household with an annual income of 150 percent of the federal poverty level (approximately \$33,000 for a family of four). For residents over the age of 65, an expired driver's license or photo ID can be used in lieu of a current form of photo ID. Education: We had the pleasure of being host to and honoring eight teachers from across Kansas as outstanding teachers. It was a treat to hear the passion they have to teach our children. I know we could go to any school in Kansas and find teachers with this desire to teach our young people.

necessary to put off building repairs or scale back on them.

Any homeowner knows that, too – at least the ones who've gone through tough times.

- The Topeka Capital-Journal, via The Associated Press

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The main focus of this session is addressing the \$550 million budget deficit and repairing the Kansas economy. Again this week most topics revolved around the bottom line. The first step in dealing with the budget came with introduction of House Bill 2014 which includes Governor Brownback's proposal to freeze the state budget for the 2011 fiscal year. The measure makes approximately \$120 million in cuts and orders several funding transfers. If passed in its current form, the bill would create a \$35 million surplus for the State General Fund in 2011.

Reforming State Government: This week the governor and lieutenant governor, with House and Senate leaders, announced plans to address the financial problems facing Kansas through structural reform to state government. Specific area targeted for restructuring are the Kansas Public Employees Retirement System and Medicaid, along with defining "suitability" concerning education.

The Senate was charged with addressing the state retirement system, with an unfunded liability of \$8 billion, the second-worst in the U.S., falling only ahead of Illinois.

Brownback assigned to the House the task of defining the term "suitable education" in the Kansas Constitution. Existing school finance law is unclear in this regard. The definition will have considerable impact on educational funding, and I anticipate it to be one of the most challenging issues this session. The Legislature has done its best to provide equitable school funding in a down economy and most of us believe the taxpayers want their tax dollars in the classroom and not the courtroom. I'm confident we'll find a reasonable solution.

Lt. Governor Colyer has been charged with restructuring the state's Medicaid program. A doctor himself, Colyer will be working with a

sub-cabinet to review and recommend reform proposals to improve the quality of care for Kansans on Medicaid, control costs and make long-term improvements in the health and wellness of Kansans.

House Bill 2035: I am proud to co-sponsor House Bill 2035 authored by Representative Lance Kinzer. The bill aims to restrict lateterm abortion procedures, expand parental consent requirements for minors seeking abortions and strengthen the state's partial-birth abortion law to better align with tighter federal law. This measure is a combination of legislation passed during prior sessions that was vetoed by Democratic governors Sebelius and Parkinson.

The bill requires a specific medical diagnosis for a late-term abortion, requires women seeking abortions to be informed the procedure will terminate the life of a human being, allows civil lawsuits against doctors who violate late-term abortion law, mandates reporting of sex abuse evidence on minors wanting an abortion; requires both parents of a minor to consent to an abortion if she comes from a stable home that shows no evidence of abuse; and clarifies when courts can bypass parental consent requirements.

House Bill 2039 - Smoking Ban: Introduced Jan. 19, the bill removes the gaming floor exemption in the current statewide smoking ban. The current ban allows smoking on the gaming floor of racetrack and gaming facilities. The bill has been referred to the House Health and Humans Services Committee for consideration.

Voter Identification Legislation: This week the Safe and Fair Elections Act was introduced. The measure would require new Kansas

In the governor's proposed budget, the money in the base state aid-per-pupil would decline by \$75 this fiscal year and \$157 in the next budget year.

Commerce and Economic Development: Brownback wants to help the 40 counties which have had double-digit population losses. New residents moving into one of these counties from another state would not have to pay Kansas income tax for several years. This would not cost the state any funds.

Insurance: Insurance Commissioner Sandy Praeger was at our committee meeting to discuss implementation of Obamacare.

You may contact me at: rick.billinger@ house.ks.gov or call me at (785) 899-4700. My office phone is (785) 296-7659, Room 754-B in the Docking Building.

Rick Billinger is the state representative from the 121st District. He currently serves on the Commerce and Economic Development, Education Funding, Insurance and Local Government committees.



Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

