



## Other Viewpoints

# Tax overhaul needs close scrutiny first

Kansans don't know everything Gov. Sam Brownback wants to do about their taxes, and they won't until he reveals his economic proposal for the next legislative session in January. But there's already a big target on the state income tax. That's a cause for celebration for many, but it also merits scrutiny.

Brownback's thinking became more clear recently when he addressed a Kansas Policy Institute gathering in Wichita. He understandably dislikes the fact that Kansas is losing 3,000 or so folks a year to other states, and he thinks lower taxes will help spur job and population growth. His administration is working with none other than former Reagan adviser Arthur Laffer on a plan to gradually reduce and perhaps eliminate the state income tax.

But especially with K-12 schools, higher education and social services so underfunded now, there will be questions that Kansans and their GOP-led Legislature need to ask and see answered before the Brownback administration succeeds in doing in the state income tax and fundamentally altering the state revenue stream. Among them:

- Does the state's income tax really top the list of reasons that residents leave and businesses stay away? An individual or family picks up and moves someplace because of its jobs, schools, leisure activities, cost of living and quality of life. Businesses have their own must-have lists, often topped by the availability of labor and land and the regulatory climate.
- Though the thinking, at least among Laffer and his devotees, is that tax cuts pay for themselves by generating new revenue, do they? Or will those revenues just have to be replaced via other, more regressive taxes, including a permanent extension of the 1 percent sales tax now set to mostly expire in 2013?
- What about the state's nearly 100 sales-tax exemptions, which save select Kansas taxpayers \$4.2 billion a year while others pick up the revenue slack? Are no Republicans other than state Sen. Dick Kelsey, R-Goddard, willing to take them on? (During his gubernatorial campaign, Brownback likened eliminating the exemptions to raising taxes.)
- What about finally ending the sales tax on food? Americans in 31 states don't pay sales taxes on food purchased for consumption at home. Kansans do. Even Texas, the state Brownback often points to as a model, has such an exemption.

Having no state income tax could be a bold stroke that would get Kansas noticed amid the most difficult economic climate in generations. But the coming tax overhaul needs to make sense within Kansas, without throwing taxation out of balance and further forcing state budget cuts – and, it follows, dreaded property-tax increases by cities, counties and school districts.

The 2011 Legislature, its GOP strength newly concentrated by the 2010 election, was keen on doing most of what the state's bold new conservative Republican governor asked of it. But in 2012, and especially with regard to an issue as big as tax policy, lawmakers need to take their time, show some foresight and get it right.

— *The Wichita Eagle, via the Associated Press*

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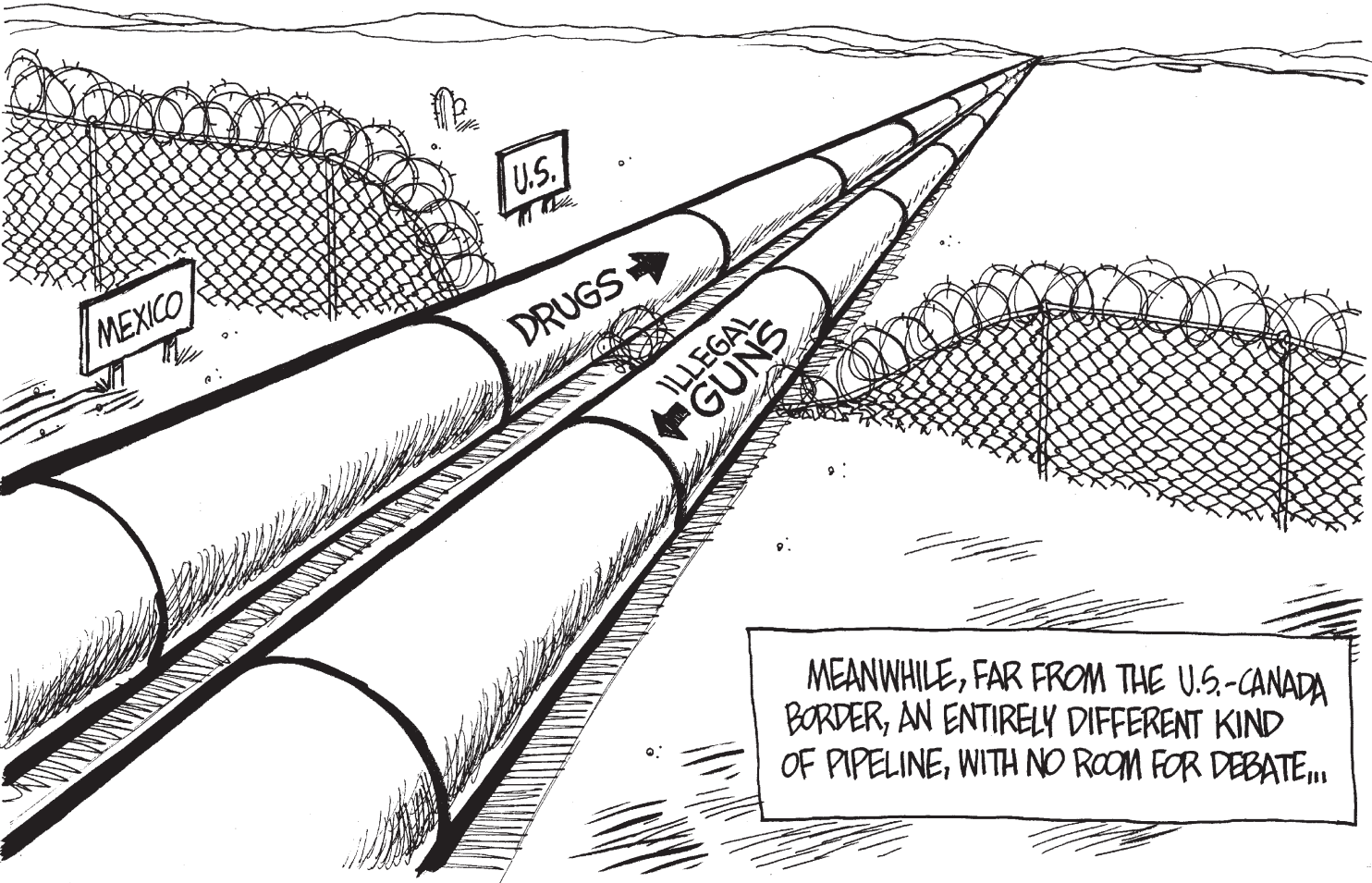
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# Look around, it's a new season

Has it ever occurred to you how many things we see every day have really become invisible?

With the beginning of cooler weather, the possibility of fall in the air, everyday sights around town are once again bringing themselves to our attention.

Trees which have mostly been obstacles for lawnmowers which provided a little shade that may or may not have helped cut the oppressive heat of the summer – those trees are showing the beginnings of a change in the seasons. Not turning yet, they still are not the green of spring or summer.

Flowers which limped through the heat have gained a second wind, while blossoms of the fall season are competing for center stage.

Windows are sparkling – with homecoming slogans. Funny how these signs of autumn are ever-fresh even as they stay familiar, bringing back memories of other windows, other paint



## Marian Ballard

### • Collection Connections

jobs, even (horrors!) other color schemes from schools patriotically imitating Nebraska's Big Red. We had an interesting discussion the other day about local variations in homecoming coronation practices. Yes, kids, there are other ways to organize it, though your way is fine, too.

The thing that most looks different about this time of year, though, is the air. It's odd to think that – after all, it's not as if we live someplace like L.A. where I gather the air is so thick it's chewable on occasion.

Here in western Kansas, we really can't even see the air unless there's a little fog. Yet in the fall, it's even clearer, bright and sparkling like a just-washed window.

Maybe that's why fall is my favorite season. When I was a kid, living in a house without combination storm windows, fall was a time when the light-dimming screens came down, windows got washed, and clear glass went up. We instantly got more light from the day.

There's no screen on my office window, but it still seems like the bricks of the street are a little more cheerful and the squirrel going about his business a little more fuzzy.

Look around today. Enjoy the sunlight, and Happy Fall.

*Marian Ballard has collected careers as counselor, librarian, pastor, and now copy editor for the Colby Free Press. She collects ideas, which are more portable than other stuff.*

# Should health care records be centralized?

It's been said a thousand times: Congress had to pass President Obama's health care law in order to find out what's in it. But, despite the repetitiveness, the level of shock from each new discovery never seems to recede.

This time, America is learning about the federal government's plan to collect and aggregate confidential patient records for every one of us.

In a proposed rule from Secretary Kathleen Sebelius and the Department of Health and Human Services, the federal government is demanding insurance companies submit detailed health care information about their patients.

Health and Human Services has proposed the federal government pursue one of three paths to obtain this sensitive information: A "centralized approach" wherein insurers' data go directly to Washington; an "intermediate state-level approach" in which insurers give the information to the 50 states; or a "distributed approach" in which health insurance companies crunch the numbers according to federal bureaucrat edict.

It's par for the course with the federal government, but abstract terms are used to distract from the real objectives of this idea: no matter which "option" is chosen, government bureaucrats would have access to the health records of every American – including you.

There are major problems with any one of these three "options." First is the obvious breach of patient confidentiality. The federal government does not exactly have a stellar track record when it comes to managing private information about its citizens.

Why should we trust that the federal government would somehow keep all patient records confidential? In one case, a government em-



## U.S. Rep. Tim Huelskamp

### • Capitol Notes

ployee's laptop containing information about 26.5 million veterans and their spouses was stolen from the employee's home.

There's also the Health and Human Services contractor who lost a laptop containing medical information about nearly 50,000 Medicare beneficiaries. And, we cannot forget when the Department of Agriculture's computer system was compromised and information and photos of 26,000 employees, contractors and retirees potentially accessed.

The second concern is the government compulsion to seize details about private business practices. Certainly many health insurance companies defended and advocated for the president's health care law, but they likely did not know this was part of the bargain.

They are being asked to provide proprietary information to governments for purposes that will undermine their competitiveness. Obama and Sebelius made such a big deal about Americans being able to keep the coverage they have under ObamaCare; with these provisions, such private insurance may cease to exist if insurers are required to divulge their business models.

Certainly businesses have lost confidential data like the federal government has, but the power of the market can punish the private sector. A victim can fire a health insurance

company; he cannot fire a bureaucrat.

What happens to the federal government if it loses a laptop full of patient data or business information? What recourse do individual citizens have against an inept bureaucrat who leaves the computer unlocked? Imagine a Wikileaks-sized disclosure of every American's health histories. The results could be devastating, embarrassing – even Orwellian.

With its extensive rule-making decrees, ObamaCare has been an exercise in creating authority out of thin air at the expense of individuals' rights, freedoms and liberties.

The ability of the federal government to spy on, review and approve individuals' private patient-doctor interactions is an excessive power-grab.

Like other discoveries since the law's passage, this one leaves us scratching our heads as to the necessity not just of this provision, but the entire law.

The Health and Human Services attempts to justify its proposal on the grounds that it has to be able to compare performance. No matter what the explanation is, however, this type of data collection is an egregious violation of patient-doctor confidentiality and business privacy. It is like J. Edgar Hoover in a lab coat.

And, no matter what assurances Obama, Sebelius and their unelected and unaccountable bureaucrats make about protections and safeguards of data, too many people already know what can result when their confidential information gets into the wrong hands, either intentionally or unintentionally.

*Tim Huelskamp is the congressman from Kansas' 1st District, serving his first term.*

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