

Other Viewpoints

No rubber stamp on state tax reforms

The Kansas House and Senate seem to be feeling their way on tax reform rather than following any playbook, including the governor's, or even doing basic math at times.

It's been fascinating to watch lawmakers look hard at the realities and opportunities of tax policy in the state, including a House debate that lasted more than five hours March 13.

But tax reform needs to make fiscal sense and broadly benefit Kansans. And it's hard to disagree with state Rep. Nile Dillmore, D-Wichita, that House members were being "fiscally irresponsible and intellectually dishonest" last Wednesday in approving that chamber's reform bill. That legislation could reduce state revenues by nearly \$2.2 billion over five years, while its 3 percent cap on state-spending growth essentially makes permanent the punishing budget cuts of the past few years to education, social services and other programs.

The session can't be going as Gov. Sam Brownback had hoped in January when he unveiled his bold plan to phase out the state income tax, extend the temporary sales-tax increase and eliminate a host of tax credits he viewed as social engineering.

But it's to the credit of state legislators that they have been willing to second-guess so much of the Brownback plan, which was heavily influenced by the suspect advice of Reagan economist Arthur Laffer. Indeed, the version of Brownback's proposal that passed out of the Senate Assessment and Taxation Committee last Wednesday was missing key parts, though it still would break the promise made by the 2010 Legislature to end the temporary 1-cent sales tax in 2013 and ignore real-estate agents' pleas to continue the mortgage tax deduction.

Though the prime goal for many remains doing something to reduce the state income-tax burden, lawmakers have wandered away from that long enough to at least acknowledge that property taxes are what Kansans truly hate and, in the House, even pass a long-sought repeal of sales tax on groceries.

They also wisely seem to be steering clear of proposals to rob the transportation plan, end the historic tax credits that have been so vital to Wichita's downtown revitalization and eliminate the earned income tax credit (though the House would cut it in half).

Where this is going remains anybody's guess — and many people's worry. The hope is that lawmakers will continue to be deliberative and resist the temptation to pass some radical reform at the last moment that might serve re-election this year but hurt Kansas' ability to cover its obligations for years to come.

— *The Wichita Eagle, via the Associated Press*

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When storms come, stay behind them

One of the things the National Weather Service stresses at storm-spotter training is safety. It might seem heroic, but there's really no point in getting yourself in harm's way while watching for severe storms.

You might get diverted from the task at hand if you're hurt, for instance. And it's way easier to spot a tornado from the side or rear of a storm. If you're in front of a storm, you're in the path of whatever it can throw at you — from softball-size hail, 100 mph downdrafts and heavy rain that obscures everything else to an actual tornado.

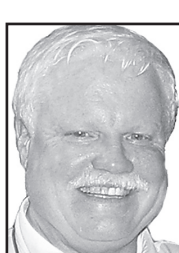
For tornadoes almost always form to the rear of a supercell thunderstorm. All the other stuff comes out the front.

A spotter who gets in front of a storm is in harm's way, and if there is a tornado, he can't see it.

At the Oberlin training class last Wednesday, forecaster Chris Foltz has a couple of "Don't be this guy" videos to make that point.

Another thing you don't want to do, he said, is try to outrun a tornado. They can move pretty quickly, and weather experts say a car is just about the worst place you can be. Tornadoes can pick them up, tumble them, smash them. Anyplace else — in a building, in the basement, even in the ditch with your hands over your head — is better than being in a vehicle.

And if you do get caught in a car where you can't get away from a tornado, Mr. Foltz said, the LAST place you want to go is under an overpass. It may look safer, but he noted that the wind may be 20 percent faster up under the end of a bridge than down on the pavement



Steve Haynes

• Along the Sappa

below.

People have been sucked right out of "safe" shelter under an underpass, with disastrous results. Dave Floyd, the meteorologist who handles the warning network for the Goodland weather office, made this point last year with several photos of whole buildings stuffed under underpasses. Foltz has a more poignant picture, a photo of an underpass where an Oklahoma family tried to hide from a tornado.

The storm first flung mud at them, leaving their outlines on the concrete, then blew them right out of their hiding place, leaving the outlines behind.

Spotters learn to position themselves so they can see the "rain-free base" of a supercell, the area at the back where warm air rushes in and is sucked up into the storm's vortex. That's the engine that produces a "wall cloud," a lowering of the base caused by intruding air, and possibly a tornado.

The best place to be is off to the side or behind the storm where you can see the intake structure. Not out front.

The crowd last week pretty much filled the big meeting room at The Gateway, and the volunteers made a rapt audience for slides of

storms, wall clouds and the like. Foltz noted that this already has been a big year for tornadoes, though we've only had a couple in the northwest part of the state.

And while Kansas is the second state in tornado frequency per square mile, no one has died in a tornado in northwest Kansas for nearly 70 years — in May 1942, when a huge twister roared past Oberlin, leaving 15 dead. That's remarkable.

One thing forecasters are concerned with: modern forecast and warning systems, why have so many people been killed in tornadoes in the past few years?

Foltz said part of it may just be chance: the weather service tells people to get out of cars and trailer homes into a solid building, to an interior room or basement.

But, he said, "When an EF5 tornado comes along and wipes the home clear off the foundation, the basement may not be so safe."

The same could be said for big buildings such as the schools and hospital devastated by the Joplin, Mo., tornado and other large storms in recent years. If your shelter blows away, it doesn't do you much good.

Storm spotters, mostly volunteers, work with the weather service to help keep us safe, give us time to take cover. That may not always work, but it's a heck of a lot better than the warning people got back in 1942, which was virtually none.

Steve Haynes is president of Nor'West Newspapers. When he has the time, he'd rather be reading a good book or casting a fly.

Online 'university' skips coursework

Don't expect to drive through the beautiful campus of Western Governors University. There is no campus. Established in 1997 by 19 western governors — not including Kansas — to "solve" the teacher shortage of the prior decade, this "university" is completely online. And it operates on the same philosophy as the General Educational Development certificate: forget actual coursework and just take a test.

The General Educational Development certificate has earned a poor reputation. With a few exceptions, students who drop out of high school but take the certificate course continue to earn wages equivalent to those who never completed high school. Those who attempt post-secondary community colleges or universities drop out at a much higher rate than those who completed regular high school. And the military finds over the last two decades that nearly 40 percent of General Educational Development and virtual school students fail to complete their three years of military commitment.

Similar to the General Educational Development certificate, Western Governors University substitutes the test for the education. Instead of awarding credit hours, it is "competency based," simply another term for test-driven. This philosophy for training teachers may sound good until you apply it to other professions. Skip medical school and go straight to the medical boards — pass the boards and you are a medical doctor. Skip law school and go straight to the bar exams — pass the bar and you are a lawyer.

Of course you do not learn to conduct surgery or prepare a court case in studying for an exam. Veteran teachers know that our exams



John Richard Schrock

• Education Frontlines

are only a partial dipstick measure of the richer experiences that students gain in classes. Our tests do not replace our coursework.

I train biology teachers, so I was particularly interested in how Western Governors credits lab work. They charge an extra \$350 and send the student a "home science lab" so they can do shoe box experiments. I look down my science hall at the hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of DNA analyzers, centrifuges, autoclaves and other equipment that a real university uses to train real biology teachers. Modern biology uses CSI-type equipment; Western Governors sends their biology teachers a Mr. Wizard kit for the kitchen sink.

"A scholar must not confuse an education with an examination" cautioned Chu Hsi, a Chinese educator in the year 1199. Yet 900 years later, this operation that abandons real experiences for testing has hoodwinked both regional accreditors and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education into blessing this college General Educational Development certificate.

Its real appeal is "convenience." The fact that it is cheaper than the for-profits and was started by governors gives it a political legitimacy that it does not deserve.

But the convenience of staying home com-

bined with taking tests instead of courses goes a long way.

Governors of Texas, Washington and Indiana — apparently all education experts — have just welcomed Western Governors into their states, not just for teacher education, but so students who do not succeed in regular colleges and universities can "succeed" at Western Governors in a broader range of fields. Stop and think just what that statement is really saying.

The dilution of the value of U.S. college degrees has already become a common topic at European and Asian education conferences.

So far, Kansas is holding the line — requiring genuine coursework and real universities.

But if you see Western Governors "University" come to Kansas, you will know that the decline of bona fide university credentials is underway in Kansas, too.

John Richard Schrock, a professor of biology and department chair at a leading teacher's college, lives in Emporia. He emphasizes that his opinions are strictly his own.

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