



Other Viewpoints

Rural boost reports say incentive pays

When rolled out last year, a new program focused on luring people to rural Kansas showed promise.

Based on early reports, the Kansas Rural Opportunity Zones incentive pushed by Gov. Sam Brownback is indeed showing signs of paying off.

Communities in Kansas have reported new residents taking advantage of the program, which offers incentives to people who move from out of state to Kansas counties that have experienced steep population declines, or are relatively poor.

Statewide, 77 of Kansas' 105 counties lost residents from 2000 to 2010, with 23 losing more than 10 percent of their populations, according to U.S. Census figures. Rural counties in particular know the pain of such erosion.

Not surprisingly, many of the 50 counties targeted for the deal to lure new residents are in western Kansas, which has endured ongoing population losses.

Under the program, new residents don't have to pay state income tax through 2016. They also may participate in a state-matching program to help pay off student loans, which could help bring doctors, dentists and other professionals to underserved areas.

More than 600 people reportedly have applied to have up to \$15,000 of their student loans repaid. Of that figure, roughly half have been approved, with many more pending. Applications reportedly have come from 38 states.

The plan isn't a cure-all, of course. Communities involved must deliver jobs and other amenities to attract and keep residents. Multiple strategies are needed to help rural areas rebound during challenging economic times.

Still, consider the Rural Opportunity Zones plan a proactive way to help communities that otherwise might have to concede to population losses with such drastic measures as closing schools and pursuing other consolidation.

The program was pitched as an opportunity to fuel economic growth while investing in the future of counties trying to survive.

While there's plenty to dislike about the governor's overall plan to spur economic growth — one featuring massive tax cuts that will slash the state's income — consider the Rural Opportunity Zones program, a welcome strategy at a time Kansas should do more to support and preserve its rural way of life.

— *The Garden City Telegram, via the Associated Press*

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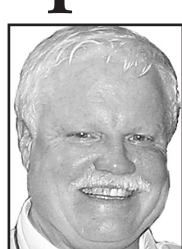
Redistricting upset has far-reaching effect

A redistricting plan that brought 65 new members to the Kansas Legislature has boosted our area's representatives to positions of power and influence far beyond their years in harness, but at a price.

Rep. Ward Cassidy, who's just finished his second term, now chairs the Education Budget Committee, actually a subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee. Sitting in his office Thursday, he said with a note of awe in his voice that his committee has 63 percent of the state budget on its plate, including public schools and higher education.

This week, he said, they will be hearing testimony from presidents of the state's six universities, among others. Mr. Cassidy, a former principal who now serves as school counselor in St. Francis, confided that he's always been a little in awe of college presidents. Now, he'll have a big say on the fate of their budgets.

Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer, after two terms as a member of the House and two in the Senate, has reached similar heights. He's now chairman of the State and Federal Affairs Committee, which handles many statewide issues, including liquor laws. It's one of only three "exempt" committees in the Senate, which means it can introduce bills after the normal deadline and send them to the Senate floor af-



Steve Haynes

• Along the Sappa

ter "turnaround," the day when ordinary bills have to either be sent on to the other house or killed.

Sen. Ostmeyer notes that along with 16 newcomers joining the Senate (several are former House members, however), the leadership has been turned upside down. After some bloody primary fights last summer, conservative allies of Gov. Sam Brownback are firmly in control. The old moderate-liberal block that used to control the party has been all but banished. And that in itself is a big responsibility.

"We've got 27 to 28 votes for anything we want," he said, "but we need to be sure we govern right."

The chairmanships give both men a chance to do a lot for this area and for the state, but they pay a price in lack of sleep. Both admit they're tired already, with the session barely a month old.

For Mr. Cassidy in particular, all this responsibility is something new.

"I haven't been home," he said. "I'm not sure if I'll ever get a break this year. I don't know if I'll ever get home."

His schedule starts early and ends late, he said, with meetings and work all day, receptions and events at night. And when he does get to his apartment, budgets and problems crowd his mind. When he started for his place at sundown after a 12-hour day Saturday, he added, he noticed that the other Appropriations chairs had spent the day working, too. Together, they have 94 agency budgets to hold hearings on and decide in the next few weeks.

"The fun part is all the neat people you get to meet down here," he added.

He's been in meetings with the House and Senate leadership and the governor since the week before the session, he said, and his focus remains being a voice for western Kansas.

"We're in a minority here," he said. "I've tried to put myself in a position where I can have a say. We've done a much better job (for the area) the last couple of years."

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.

Certainty needed on Main Street

When the Obama administration admitted last week that the American economy actually shrank late last year, it was described on Wall Street as "unexpected."

Really? No one saw this coming?

The sources of an economic slowdown have been evident to even the most casual observer. As Main Street seeks to get back on its feet after the worst recession and the worst economic recovery since the Great Depression, it faces a trifecta of challenges from Washington: higher taxes, Obamacare and over-regulation.

This trifecta was recently crystallized for me when Ed Marin, owner of Lampe Hardware in St. Francis, and I had a one-on-one conversation after a "town hall" meeting last week.

The store has three employees. Mr. Marin said he wants to hire another person, but he has no idea what to expect in terms of his business expenses. He recently asked his accountant what it is going to cost to comply with Obamacare, and the accountant was at a loss: there is simply no way to know or plan.

Keep in mind that Mr. Marin's business is not required (yet) to provide health insurance under Obamacare with so few employees. But with premiums going through the roof (despite promises otherwise from President Obama), his costs will go up as well.



U.S. Rep. Tim Huelskamp

• Capitol Notes

Beyond complying with Obamacare, a convoluted tax code and regulatory structure leaves him fearful of what will happen if he unintentionally fails to "cross a 't' or dot an 'i.'" He pointed out to me that top-ranking officials in Washington can violate their own tax laws (former Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner comes to mind), but one minor mistake on Mr. Marin's part, and penalties come his way. He said he pays his employees much more than minimum wage and more than meets all the labor and workplace laws. Doing so is just good business practice, he argues.

Still, he asks: "As a small business owner, how am I supposed to prepare for whatever comes out of Washington?"

Great question. Main Street — and all of America — needs some certainty. Certain and common-sense regulations. Real spending reductions so the

economy can grow. Real tax relief so Mr. Marin can hire another employee. Instead, we see higher spending, more debt, more regulations, more mandates and less freedom. That's not what Main Street wants or needs.

It is my hope — and demand — that Washington lives up to all the campaign rhetoric about protecting small business, the engine of our economy, and all American workers. I will work hard in the House, but bureaucrats need to hear from regular, hard-working, tax-paying, job-creating folks on the ground, too. As a member of the House Small Business Committee, I am pleased to announce the launch of the committee's "Small Biz Reg Watch." Through its website, the committee is educating and collecting comments from folks across the nation about regulations that will affect Main Street. I encourage all Kansans to review these proposed rules and submit their feedback to the president and his agencies. Just go to smallbusiness.house.gov/regwatch.

At this stage, small businesses and consumers can handle no more bad news — unexpected or not.

Tim Huelskamp, a Republican from Fowler, and a former state senator, is the congressman for the 1st District of Kansas.

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- Bruce Tinsley

