



Other Viewpoints

Ag tax windfall hasn't blown in yet

County commissioners across the state are expecting a tax "windfall" next year from increased assessments on agricultural land. Some are already making plans to spend it, but that might not be the best idea.

For one thing, tax windfalls have a way of disappearing as fast as they appear. A county that spends a windfall to fix roads, add to its staff or give employees a raise often has to hike taxes later to sustain the spending.

And that leads to unhappy voters.

Whether that will happen this time is anybody's guess. Commissioners have been complaining for some time that ag land was underassessed, even on the "income" formula the state uses to set its value. But that same formula can produce dips in valuation as well as increases.

Assessors tell us that part of the increase this year is due to changes at Kansas State University, which does the math on land values for the state. That part of the increase might be permanent, at least until the formula changes again. But it's only part of the increase; increases in farm income the last few years account for the rest.

And farm income comes and goes. It's known for wild swings.

So the likelihood of this windfall disappearing, or shrinking, a year or two out is great. Plus, it's a windfall in name only. Even if tax rates stay the same, the farmers and ranchers who own this land will have to pay real, larger tax bills that may not make them too happy. That could lead to more assessment appeals, unpaid taxes and unhappy voters, even pressure on the Legislature to change the formula.

A safer course for counties would be to hold the line on spending and let tax rates — gasp — go down. Voters are almost sure to approve. That would give everyone, even the farmer with an increased assessment, a break.

No doubt, there are a lot of demands on county government, especially from new programs pressed on counties by the state and federal governments. But the mood of voters in this state is pretty clear: They've elected the most conservative, anti-tax governor and Legislature in anyone's memory.

Commissioners will be tempted to increase spending next year, given the situation, but it might not be wise given the times. It might even invite a return of the old tax lid or other limits on local spending which we'd be better off without.

For now, the ball is in the commissioners' court. We advise due caution, conservative spending and listening to the will and mood of the voters. — *Steve Haynes*

Write us

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Letters will not be censored, but will be read and edited for form and style, clarity, length and legality. We will not publish attacks on private individuals or businesses not pertaining to a public issue.

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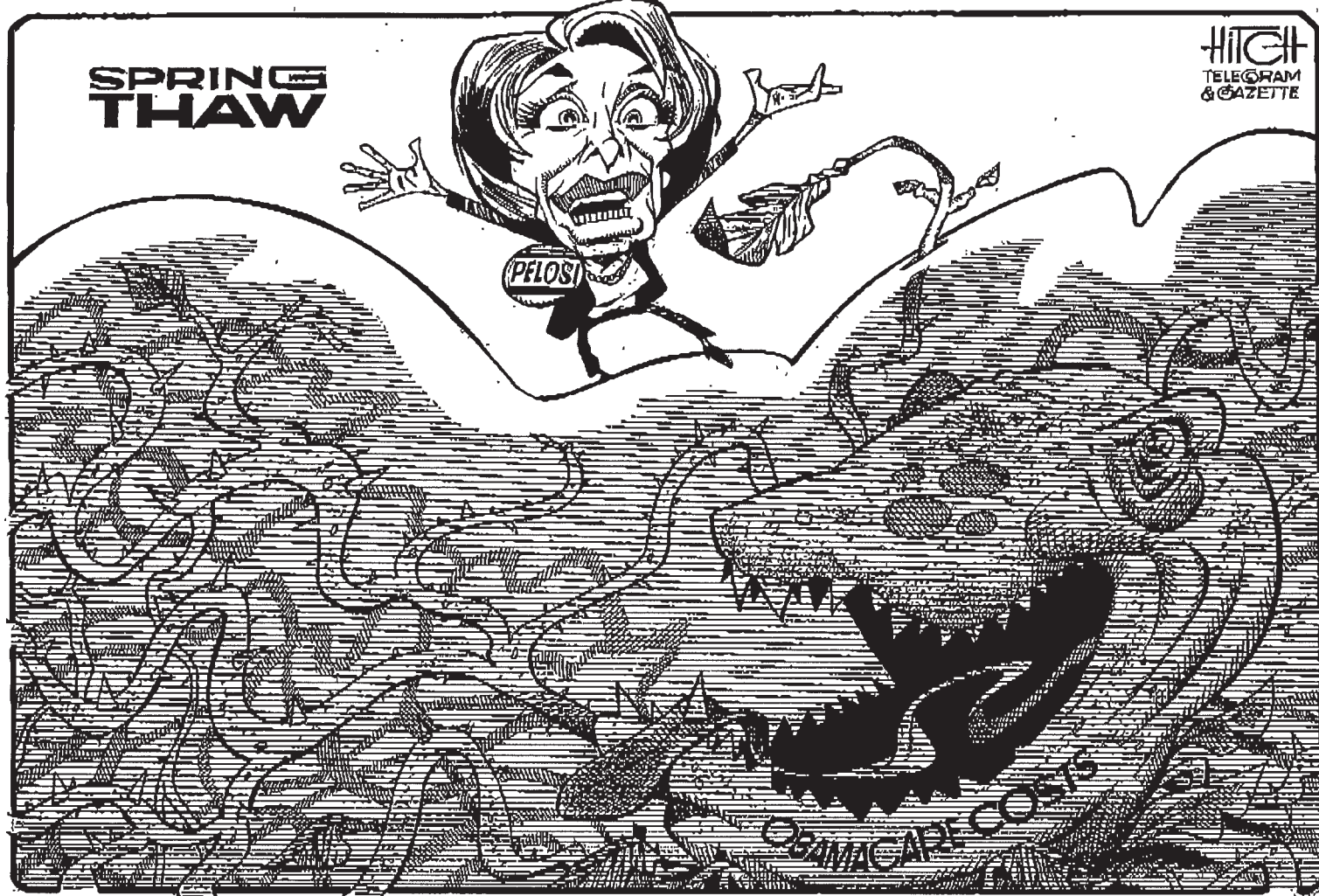
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She finally got iPad, but couldn't adapt

It took me six months to get my iPad.

You wouldn't think that it would be that difficult. I should be a pretty important person in the business. I'm an owner and chief financial officer — and that doesn't mean squat around here when it's time to hand out new equipment.

What does make a difference is what you do with the equipment. Ad and page makeup people get the best stuff. Reporters are next, although they usually point out that they make up most of the pages and get a better spot in the line for goodies.

Then there are the correspondents, bookkeepers, ad salespeople and press-room supervisors. They get what works its way down because, while they need computers, they don't need the biggest or the fastest.

But an iPad was not in the equipment list — MacBook Pros, bigger and better screens, scanners and miscellaneous things for the press were.

Still, I travel a lot, and I figured that I could use the iPad instead of my laptop much of the time and it would be so much easier to take through airports.

Whine, whine, whine. Huff, huff, huff. Puff, puff, puff. And more whining to both Steve and Evan, the tech guy.

For about six months, there were a lot of smiles, pats on the head and raised eyebrows, but no iPad.



Cynthia Haynes

• Open Season

Finally, I think they got tired of listening to me and decided to grease the squeaky wheel. Or maybe Evan just found a good deal on an iPad.

Whichever, I got it. And then I went online and found a great case and keyboard for it. There it was, my baby fully outfitted with a Kensington KeyFolio Pro 2 removable keyboard, case and stand.

I was in business.

I got busy setting it up, and was surprised to find out that it was more like a phone than a computer. It had a touch screen which worked as well as the keyboard and could take pictures if you didn't mind holding it up at an odd angle and looking pretty dorky.

I got it set up for my e-mail. I put apps on it. I get a couple of books on how to get the most out of your new baby iPad.

Then I went back to my normal life and the baby sat there on the table day after day after day. Sometimes I would take it in my bag when I went somewhere, but I didn't get it out.

I didn't take any pictures with it, check my e-mail on it, surf the web or even try to write a story on it. I just admired it and worked on my laptop.

This went on for about four months, then it was time to go on vacation. I took my laptop, my camera and my iPad. This was the opportunity to use the baby and prove to myself that I needed this piece of equipment.

We spent a wonderful week with our friends Merle and Mary. Merle spent time on his laptop. Steve spent time on his laptop. Mary took pictures, surfed the web, shared stories and laughs with friends on her little handheld device. I worked on my laptop, and didn't open the baby.

On my return, I made a difficult decision. I handed my baby — complete with fancy case and keyboard — back to Evan. If I wasn't going to use it, I was sure that someone else in the company would.

It was a hard decision, but my baby needed a home where it would be loved and used. Now Evan says that if I'll just give him the cords that go with it, he'll find it a new home. Boy, he wants everything. Whine, whine, whine.

Cynthia Haynes, co-owner and chief financial officer of Nor'West Newspapers, writes this column weekly. Her pets include cats, toads and a praying mantis. Contact her at c.haynes@nwkansan.com

It's about institutions, not kids

The Kansas Legislature is considering a wide range of education issues this session.

Legislation has been proposed to allow public and private universities to authorize independent public charter schools (all charter schools are, by definition, public schools), modify collective bargaining rules to give districts more operational flexibility, create tax credit scholarships for low income families to attend the school of their choice and establish a third-grade reading initiative to ensure that kids being promoted to fourth grade can actually read — just to name a few.

Much of the opposition to these student-focused reforms have been couched in terms of wanting what's best for students, but in reality, it's largely about protecting institutions and the adults in the system.

Kansas has one of the worst charter schools laws in the nation, allowing only the local school district to authorize a public charter school to compete with it. Parents who can't afford to move to another neighborhood or pay private tuition are forced to send their kids to the school assigned to them, regardless of whether they believe the school is right for their child. Public charter schools are enormously popular; over 600,000 kids are on waiting lists around the country, most of whom come from low-income families.

The charter school bill failed in the House Education Committee by a single vote, with some opponents saying they were concerned about districts losing money. Others said exempting charter schools from collective bargaining rules is unfair to teachers unions. Some said competition wasn't needed because Kansas schools have high student achievement. There was actually concern that smart kids might leave and thereby bring down districts' average scores! Rep. Ed Trimmer, D-Winfield,

Other Opinions

• **Dave Trabert**
Kansas Policy Inst.

deliberately misrepresented our testimony and claimed that it's bad to have multiple authorizers of charter schools (the problem is having authorizers with low standards, not multiple authorizers).

The opposition was all about defending institutions and the adults in the system. By the way, the low-income kids who benefit the most from having choice are typically about two years' worth of learning behind everyone else.

Senators on the Education Committee who voted down the third-grade reading initiative (five to six) said holding back a student who really can't read could be harmful to their self esteem. Like a child feels good about not being able to read. They also said holding kids back would create an unfunded mandate on districts and that some district employees were opposed to the notion.

Districts are promoting some kids to the fourth grade, where they transition from learning to read to having to be able to read to learn, with full knowledge that they cannot read. That this discussion even has to be held is unbelievable; the fact that the education establishment is fighting to promote kids who can't read is unconscionable.

Superintendents want collective bargaining reforms so they don't have to negotiate the length of classes or the school day. They want

and need the flexibility to decide how and when to evaluate teachers. It's also not in students' best interests to have anything get in the way of having effective teachers in the classroom. But the fight over collective bargaining reforms is all about what's best for the adults in the system.

'It's all about the kids' shouldn't just be a slogan for legislators. It should be what really drives every education discussion.

Dave Trabert is President of Kansas Policy Institute. He is the author of "Removing Barriers to Better Public Education." He serves on the Tax and Fiscal Policy Task Force for the American Legislative Exchange Council. He graduated cum laude from West Liberty State College with a degree in Business Administration. E-mail him at dave.trabert@kansaspolicy.org.

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Dear Wonderful Very Tall Best-Buddy Dennis, You may desire to take a vacation out of the country for a few days...