

Other Viewpoints

Maintain state's highway quality

Kansans have known for some time that their highways were among the best in the nation. Road trips to other states and other parts of the country continue to provide evidence supporting what we already know about our highway system.

Nevertheless, a recent report by the Reason Foundation proved to be interesting reading.

The foundation, which according to the Associated Press is a Libertarian-leaning think tank, ranked Kansas' highway system second among all states for its condition and cost-effectiveness, based on data from 2009. Only North Dakota's highway system was deemed better.

The Reason Foundation, which had Kansas ranked third the previous two years, wrote that the state maintained its highways in good condition at lower-than-average costs for maintenance and administrative costs.

Frankly, we didn't realize the state's cost for highway maintenance and administration were lower than average. That's good to know, as is the fact Kansas highways are held in good regard beyond our borders.

However, good highways can deteriorate rapidly if not maintained properly. It is important that Kansas continue to maintain and improve its highway system – not for the sake of rankings but rather for the safety of Kansas motorists and others who have occasion to travel to and across our state.

The highways Kansans enjoy now benefited greatly from major improvement and maintenance programs funded by three different 10-year programs, which began in 1989, 1999 and 2010, under the direction of the Kansas Department of Transportation. The Kansas Turnpike Authority has contributed with improvements and exceptional maintenance of 236 miles of highway running from the Kansas-Oklahoma border northeast to Kansas City, Kan.

Many Kansans were concerned earlier this year that a merger of the Department of Transportation and the Turnpike Authority would siphon money from the authority and detract from turnpike maintenance, but the final version of the merger bill sent to Gov. Sam Brownback stipulated that turnpike toll revenues couldn't be used for anything other than turnpike projects.

That's good policy. But the state has a habit of diverting transportation funds earmarked for highway projects to other uses. That's bad policy.

The diversions began years ago, long before the current administration was in power. History shows some Department of Transportation money can be directed to other uses without significant harm but regular, large draws on that account eventually will have a negative impact on highway maintenance and development.

If Kansas' highway system is to maintain its superiority, the state must begin using all the tax money collected for highways on highways.

— *The Topeka Capital-Journal, via the Associated Press*



One farmer's turn came this year

Once in a long while all the chips fall the right way and a Kansas farm family raises the best wheat crop it ever had. The Kent Winter family of northwestern Sedgewick County harvested such a crop in late June of this year.

"It's just incredible when the weather cooperates and you manage to have a few things in place – but it's rare, it's not customary, it's unusual to have such a crop," says Kent Winter. "It was a real blessing for us."

The Sedgewick County farmer started working with his father 30 years ago. He's farmed on his own since his dad retired in the late '90s.

Winter recalls many a year when wheat harvest didn't pan out so well. The year 1967 stands out as a "very thin" harvest because of a dry winter.

However, 2013 will be a wheat harvest the Winter family remembers for a long time. The majority of the 800 acres produced 60 bushels-per-acre or a bit more. A couple of wheat fields pushed the low 70s.

"It was a combination of small incremental things that added up" Winter says. "Most of them were out of our control. We had a lot of help from Mother Nature and a higher power."

The genesis of this outstanding wheat crop started last summer during the multi-year drought in southern Kansas. In the back of his mind, Winter kept remembering what the "old-timers" always said.

"Wheat is a dry-weather crop."



John Schlageck

• Insights
Kansas Farm Bureau

This prompted Winter to plant more than half the acres he farmed to wheat. Some timely fall rains helped establish a good stand back in October.

Another factor that led to this year's bumper crop was planting the wheat into some failed fields of dry-land corn and soybeans from the summer of 2012. Because of last summer's drought, this corn and bean cropland had a good amount of residual fertilizer available for the newly sown wheat crop.

Planting this year's wheat crop in these fields just seemed right, Winter says. Being able to rotate this row crop land into wheat also seemed like the right thing to do.

The real game changer for this year's wheat crop occurred in mid-February when the crop was blanketed with 20 inches of snow.

"We'd already top dressed the crop," Winter says. "The snow came out of nowhere. It stayed on our fields and the moisture went deep into the soil."

Timely spring rains followed the snowstorm

and a cool period ensued as the wheat crop filled.

Five inches of rain fell during this late spring period and really capped off a tremendous growing season, Winter says.

"We were fortunate to dodge the hail and bad weather that often accompanies such spring moisture events," the Sedgewick County farmer says. "In the back of our minds, we all know it may be our turn to have less than favorable weather and a more normal growing period."

Still, this year's crop remains the culmination of a great harvest for the south-central Kansas farmer. Winter is thankful for his bumper crop. He also understands that next year someone else in another region of Kansas will have a turn at harvesting a great crop like his of 2013.

Let's hope this will be the case for farmers in western Kansas, where some have suffered crop failures, especially in the southwest, where drought has plagued the region for three consecutive years..

John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. He grew up on a diversified farm near Seguin, and his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.

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Congress, relearn how to make policy

I've noticed a recurring question as I talk to people about Congress. What can be done, they wonder, to get Congress back on track? Is our national legislature capable of serious policy making?

At a time when polls say jobs and the economy are Americans' chief concern, Congress has not passed a single piece of economic legislation. Instead, it's focused on investigations. It's an institution with very little to show for its efforts.

There's a reason for this. Few legislators know how to make it work any more. Few respect the legislative process and know it intimately, have mastered the substantive and procedural details and have the political savvy and skill to move a bill to enactment.

How can Congress improve? A few procedural fixes might help, but the real answer is actually pretty simple: change the way members of Congress work.

First, they need to put in more time legislating on the major challenges facing the country. Only twice this year has Congress been in session for four weeks straight. Its members spend too much of each week at home campaigning and meeting with constituents, and don't use their limited time in Washington well: much of it goes to meeting lobbyists, legislating on minor if not trivial matters, making the rounds of receptions and raising money.

Members have few occasions to get to know one another except in the confrontational settings of committee rooms and the floor of their chamber, and as a result they don't know how to work together. Just as dispiriting, they know even less about what we sent them there to do: crafting and enacting legislation. It takes skill and perseverance to create meaningful policies that forge common ground among competing interests and ideologies. The time-consuming, difficult work of legislating on complex issues

Other Opinions

• **Lee Hamilton**
Center on Congress

is becoming a lost art.

To begin restoring it, members have to remember that they are a separate, co-equal branch of government. They've allowed Congress to become a reactive body. It takes its cues from the president – either in deference to him or in opposition to him, but always with reference to him. Capitol Hill should be an engine of creative policy making and inquiry, not the place where dynamic lawmaking withers.

This can't happen, however, if members of Congress continue putting politics ahead of policy. Many of the bills passed today in one chamber or the other are not even taken up by the other body. This is posturing, not legislating.

I'm not naive. Politics is always going to be important, but it ought not dominate lawmakers' actions. They can be politicians at election time, but once they reach Capitol Hill, our Constitution expects them to be policy makers and legislators. So do ordinary Americans. The partisan maneuvering, the compulsion to send a message rather than legislate, and the lack of solid accomplishment have driven Americans' disdain for Congress to record highs.

If lawmakers want to reverse this, they need to re-order their priorities. They'll rein in their partisan instincts. They'll spend less time asking for money – often from the people affected by the bills they're voting on – and more on building friendships and relationships among

colleagues, especially of the opposite party, who can help them get bills passed. They'll ignore trivial bills that give the appearance of action but accomplish little, and learn how to do rigorous oversight, with truth-seeking hearings that are fair and balanced.

They'll master the legislative process, rather than delegating bill-writing and even strategy to staff. They'll send their polite regrets to the invitations that pour in for receptions, dinners, media appearances and all the other distractions that keep a member of Congress busy, and bear down on the work their constituents sent them to pursue: crafting legislation, debating bills, deliberating with their colleagues and reaching consensus on the serious problems confronting the country.

Here's the most important part: they don't need legislation or constitutional amendments or procedural fixes or even years of seniority to start. They just need to go to work and make the Congress and our representative democracy effective at serving the best interests of the country.

Lee Hamilton is director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University. He was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for 34 years.

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Mallard Fillmore

• **Bruce Tinsley**

