

# op-ed

## Let's get local contractors involved

I am not personally concerned with the increase in taxes if it means a better education for our children.

What does concern me is the new remodeling job talked about for the schools...a contractor from out of town will of course get the contract maybe we will make some money.

We have carpenters, electricians, plumbers and air conditioner people in our community who might get the jobs but the general contractor will make money on their work and it will go out of town.

I say let our local people get together and do what is needed to get the job done. If you want to improve our economy, let our people do the remodeling.

Ed Carlton  
Goodland

To the Editor:  
In just a few days we will make a trip to the polls and vote on a bond issue of some \$23 million in total cost for school in Sherman County.

We have read different person's ideas on whether we should vote YES or vote NO on the bond issue, \$14.9 million dollars plus interest, to build new and remodel buildings.

We have been told new schools make better students. If this is the case why don't we do away with teachers and let the new buildings do the teaching, just think how much money this will save the district.

I don't believe buildings make better students and I don't believe anyone else believes this. I read in the paper one student is of the opinion a new school will better educate the next generation of pupils. Surely this education came from the teacher not like the high school like he indicates.

So whether you vote as he suggests or vote NO on the bond issue, keep in mind we get our education from the teachers and not from some building.



### from our readers

to the editor

As for our taxes being increased over the next 20 years for this bond issue, yes they make it sound like it won't be that big an issue but if you are on a low income or small Social Security pension this will definitely hurt you. So when you go to the POLL to vote think about these persons with these small incomes and how it will effect their living for the next several years.

Another thing if the State Aid continues to decrease per student this will make our regular mill levy increase locally to keep the schools running properly and this will make our taxes increase without a doubt.

So when you go to the Poll, to VOTE, consider this-it is not the buildings that make better students it is the TEACHERS. So vote NO on this BOND ISSUE.

Harold L. Van Vleet  
Goodland

To the Editor:  
Recently, Mrs. Philbrick spoke out against the proposed bond issue for the school in her, "Letter to the Community."

She listed a number of possible options, but I think it's worth noting, each option she proposed has already been researched by the board as part of their extensive three year process to find the best solutions.

If she really believed these options were the best course for our schools, she should have shown stronger leadership when these questions were still before the board. She didn't sell these options then and to me, they ring hollow now.

When Amy Sederstrom made the motion to approve this plan and the board voted unanimously to ap-

prove it, they gave us a plan that will solve a multitude of issues facing our schools. It will upgrade the school system to the best possible learning environment and at the same time, allow us to operate with the most efficiency as we steer the course for our schools in the future.

This plan will take advantage of several one-time public financing options on the table for us, including a substantial amount of interest savings along with the potential for a sizable cost share plan to help us build the only approved tornado shelter in the community. This help won't be available to us again.

When my wife and I moved to Goodland 18 years ago, two of the first people we met were Jennifer and Andy House. We've enjoyed their friendship through the years and we always appreciated Andy's reasoned demeanor and uncommon common sense.

It means a great deal to us he helped lead this process along the way and he was willing to work to see it would go forward. Andy won't have the opportunity to vote with us this time, but I have no doubt as to where he would be standing on it.

When this process is behind us and the new school has become an integral part of our community, I think it would be especially fitting if Andy's life and efforts would be recognized there. The many generations of young people who will pass through the halls of this new facility might be inspired by his memory when it's their turn to step forward and take a stand.

Make sure you take the time to get out and vote. I've already cast my vote for this project and I hope you will see fit -- to vote for it too!

Leon Volk  
Goodland

## House debates 50 bills in week

This week was a very busy week in the Kansas House of Representatives as we worked to begin clearing our legislative calendar before adjourning for our annual break. In three days, the House of Representatives debated over 50 pieces of legislation.



rick billinger  
state rep.

Next week the House will continue working to finish our legislative agenda. A significant amount of our time will be debating the budget for the next fiscal year which begins July 1 of this year. Also, members of the House will be meeting with their Senate counterparts in conference committees to negotiate the differences in legislation that has passed the House and the Senate. With each agreement reached by a conference committee, both the House and Senate must approve the compromise before they can be submitted to Governor Brownback for his consideration. Therefore, I expect the House to spend a great deal of time discussing conference committee agreements submitted for our approval next week.

As previously mentioned, the Legislature is scheduled to adjourn for its annual break and return to Topeka on April 27 for what we call "veto session." This break provides research and revenue staff time to review and assemble the necessary information we'll need to make informed decisions on the budget when we return in late April. In addition, the break provides legislators a valuable opportunity to spend time with constituents back home discussing their thoughts and concerns on issues directly impacting them.

Veto session is traditionally a time where the Legislature deals with bills approved or vetoed by the Governor. We'll do that but also dedicate a majority of our work to addressing the 2012 budget. Veto session is scheduled to go from April 17 to May 11 but the reality is we will not leave Topeka until a compromise is reached with both chambers and the Governor on our spending package. This will be a challenging task that will require flexibility, patience and focus by all involved. I look forward to assemble a responsible budget that sets our state on the right path toward economic recovery.

### Addressing KPERS (Sub. HB 2333)

First and foremost changing the age for retirees is no longer in this bill. Originally the bill would change the retirement age and years of service from the current 85 points to 95 points. Also, changing the age to coincide with the social security retirement age has been eliminated from this bill. I felt it would be very unfair to change the rules this late in the game for persons wanting to retire within the next few years.

Sub. for HB 2333 revises the KPERS retirement plan for most current state, school and local government employees but does not apply to the Kansas Police and Firemen's (KP&F) or Judges retirement plans. The bill contains three main provisions: reduces the annual KPERS benefit multiplier from 1.75 percent to 1.4 percent for future service credit beginning July 1, 2012 for all current and future public employees; increases the cap on annual KPERS employer contributions from 0.6 percent to 0.8 percent on July 1, 2012; and directs any net proceeds from the sale of state property to the unfunded liability of KPERS.

The House debated Sub. for HB 2333 on Wednesday,

March 24. During this debate an amendment was attached to the bill that creates a new tier III defined contribution plan for all new state, school and local public employees effective July 1, 2013. The House is expected to vote on this legislation early next week.

Currently, the state employee pension system, KPERS, has an unfunded liability of \$8 billion dollars. In terms of actuarial solvency, studies have shown Kansas to have the second worst state pension system in the United States, falling behind only Illinois. Pension programs nationwide have been hit hard but the stuttering economy has compounded our structural deficiencies within the KPERS system and will continue to do so unless substantive reform measures are taken to improve the stability of the pension fund.

### Wildlife and Parks Cabins (SB 123)

Many Kansans do not know that most of our state parks have cabins available for rent. The popularity of these cabins is quickly growing as Kansans look for more affordable options to escape from home.

SB 123 allows the Secretary of the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks (KDWP) to set fees for the use of cabins owned and operated by the Department. The bill limits the maximum fees for the cabins from exceeding \$250 per night; \$1,500 per week; and \$5,000 per month. In addition, the measure lowers the aggregate threshold amount requiring legislative approval for land purchased by KDWP to 160 acres from 640 acres.

### State Employee Award Program (Sub. HB 2221)

On June 30, 2006, a state employee suggestion program expired leaving the state with no method to reward state workers who bring wasteful state programs or spending to the attention of their superiors. Sub. for HB 2221 institutes a new program allowing state employees to submit a cost reduction suggestion for a state agency. If the suggestion is adopted, the employee will receive a monetary reward in an amount not to exceed 10 percent or \$5,000 of the cost reduction.

This bill passed the House on Wednesday, March 23, by a vote of 120 to 4. In the past few years, hundreds of state jobs have been eliminated and state employees are often doing the work of two or more people. This is good legislation that encourages state workers to speak up if they find deficiencies or waste in their department or agency and rewards them for their action.

### Senate Passes Two Key Pieces of Pro-Life Legislation

On Wednesday, the Senate approved two House bills relating to abortion. The first increases the reporting requirements for late-term abortions and requires under-age girls to receive parental consent before having an abortion.

The second, is modeled after legislation passed in Nebraska that prohibits abortions after 22 weeks when a baby can feel pain unless the life, or a substantial bodily function, of the mother is in danger. Governor Brownback has said he will sign both bills when they reach his desk.

If you have any input on any issues which will come before the legislature this year please contact me at: rick.billinger@house.ks.gov or call me at (785) 899-4700.

## Senate takes step on pensions

The Senate approved 35 to 0 on March 23, Senate Substitute for HB 2194, a first step in addressing the nearly \$8 billion unfunded liability to our Kansas Public Employees Retirement System.

None of the increased contributions by either the employee or employer will take effect until July 1, 2013. On that day, the statutory cap on the state contribution will increase from 1.1 percent, up from 0.6 of 1 percent. The state's increase totals about \$23 million a year. The cap for local units of government doesn't increase until Jan. 1, 2014.

The employee contributions are increased starting Jan. 1, 2014, by 1 percent with an additional 1 percent increase on Jan. 1, 2015. For Tier 1 employees, this will increase their contribution from 4 percent to 6 percent over a two-year period. For this increase in employee contribution, these employees will receive a benefit formula multiplier increase from 1.75 percent to 1.85 percent for all future years of service.

Tier 2 employees today are contributing 6 percent of their salary. Because they are currently contributing 6 percent, they are being given a one-time irrevocable option to increase their contribution rate. If Tier 2 employees choose to stay at their current 6 percent rate, they lose their cost of living adjustment when they retire



Ralph Ostmeyer  
state senator

and their multiplier will stay at the current 1.75 percent. If they elect to increase their contribution to 8 percent over two years, they will retain the cost of living adjustment and receive the increased multiplier to 1.85 percent.

The Senate bill creates a study commission of 11 members who will analyze the current system and develop a viable plan to ensure long-term sustainability. They will be asked to consider all possibilities, including a defined-contribution plan, a hybrid of some sort or a modified defined-benefit plan.

The commission must have a report for the Legislature to consider by Dec. 15. The Legislature must act on the recommendations within 180 days. The provisions of this bill do not take effect until the Legislature acts on the study commission's recommendations.

With these proposed changes, the system would reach actuarial equilibrium for the local government employees in 2015, state employees in 2016 and school district employees in 2021.

I can be reached by writing to Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer, State Capitol, 300 SW 10th Street, Room 128-S, Topeka, Kansas, 66612, or calling (785) 296-7399. My e-mail address is ostmeyer@senate.state.ks.us.

## Does eating meat cause hunger?

So far, agriculture has kept up with population - there's enough food in the world to feed everyone. But not everyone's getting fed—at least a billion people live with hunger, according to the U.N. World Food Program. And the world is in the midst of yet another spike in food prices.

As long as we keep diverting grain from human mouths to animal ones, people will go hungry. It's simple market economics: It's more profitable to produce meat - even though the meat that results from feeding grain to animals has less food value than the grain itself.

Which is why there's hunger even when there are no grain shortages: The wealthy of the world are willing to pay more to feed animals than poor people can pay to feed themselves.

So must we all become vegetarians in order to avert world hunger? Not necessarily. The spring issue of YES! Magazine suggests another route.

Recent food price spikes mean those on the margins are more likely to go hungry, and political instability is among the outcomes. In February, the World Bank reported price levels only 3 percent below the 2008 peak that produced widespread food riots. At the beginning of March, the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reported a 70 percent increase in export grain prices during the last year. The FAO Food Price Index was at its highest level since the FAO began monitoring prices in 1990.

The World Bank discusses two fac-



### from other pens

commentary

tors driving up food prices: weather and ethanol, and quotes a USDA estimate 40 percent of the U.S. corn output will go to making ethanol this year.

But in the United States in 2009, the last full year for which numbers are available, 137 million metric tons of corn, sorghum, barley, and oats became animal feed. That's 46 percent of total U.S. consumption of those grains. It's two and a half times the amount of grain the United States exported in that year.

The solution to world hunger, then, is simple: Stop eating meat.

No realistic person expects that, or anything close to it, to happen. There is a slew of valid reasons for being vegetarian: raising meat produces greenhouse gases, degrades water ways, and displaces forests and wild habitats, and many people feel the way animals are raised and slaughtered is immoral. Nonetheless, it seems meat eating will be with us always.

It turns out eating meat doesn't have to take food away from hungry people, and it doesn't have to involve a lifetime in a cage. As Joel Salatin says, in a YES! Magazine interview, "Don't blame the cow for the negatives of the industrial food system."

At Salatin's Polyface Farms, the pastures are five times as productive as the local average, and, he says, "We've never bought a bag of chemical fertilizer and we've never raised a seed." Salatin raises cattle, pigs, and chickens, and does it without using anything that could become human food. He says his farmland has gotten richer and more fertile as a result of decades of grazing.

This is the model most humans followed for most of history: Animals ate what humans couldn't, and turned into meat that humans could eat. Ron Fairlie, in his new book, Meat: A Benign Extravaganza, calls this "default livestock." He calculates a universal return to that model would return food grains to human mouths, and still produce enough meat for everyone to have some.

For the sacrifice of cutting our meat consumption, we'd eliminate the cruelty of confinement animal-feeding operations. We'd do away with the bulk of the greenhouse gases associated with industrial livestock—Salatin says his operation actually sequesters carbon. Best of all, we'd know no one in the world had to go to bed hungry.

By Doug Pibel, managing editor of YES! Magazine. The American Forum, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, educational organization, provides views on public concerns to stimulate informed discussion. Email forum@mediainforum.org.

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