

from our viewpoint...

Immigration a key issue for state

One of the most divisive issues for the Kansas Legislature this coming spring might be immigration, which oddly enough, is mostly the responsibility of the federal government.

Conservatives will be fully in command of the scene in Topeka, and they look to agree on many things. Social conservatives will push for laws restricting abortion, drugs and maybe even strip clubs while trying to defend religious liberty. All of those are areas where people have a lot of protection from the federal courts, however, so whatever the Legislature does is liable to be more for show than substance.

Victory on the floor will make a lot of people feel better after years of having social initiatives suffocated by more liberal governors, however, and Gov. Sam Brownback is liable to sign many of these bills.

Another thing liable to unite disparate conservatives is cutting the budget and keeping tax rates down. While last spring, compromise on drastic tax cuts enacted at the last moment appeared likely for the coming session, all bets are off now that conservatives have solid majorities in both Houses behind a conservative governor.

The smart money says there may be little incentive to raise more money to close an alleged \$700 million budget gap now. Instead, the emphasis may be on cutting programs and slashing the budget even more. The administration maintains it plans to put more money into public schools, however, and not less.

Whatever happens, low income-tax rates pushed last year by the governor appear to be with us for the next few years. Now neighboring Missouri is making noises about copying Kansas rates to keep pace in economic development. Lower taxes are seen as attractive to businesses looking for a new home.

But immigration is the rub. Gov. Brownback and his allies, including the state Chamber of Commerce and farm and ranch groups, tend to look at the situation from the standpoint of labor shortages. They know the state has jobs which can't be filled without immigrants. It's a practical matter with them.

The xenophobic wing of the party, led by Secretary of State Kris Kobach, wants the state to enact restrictions on hiring illegal immigrants, along with tougher still election laws and maybe even an Arizona-style law requiring police to check the status of possible illegal immigrants.

Mr. Kobach pushed the state to require voters to show photo identification, though he had no proof – and still has none – that illegal immigrants were voting or that there was any kind of problem with voter fraud. His “issue” sounded good enough that he got the bill through a conservative Legislature which should have been concerned with the civil liberties problems it raised.

When push comes to shove, and with more than 50 freshman legislators, no one really knows how to count the votes, but the issue could split the solid-red statehouse down the middle. And make a supposedly slam-dunk session more than a little interesting. — Steve Haynes



A house is not a home

It's been a long four months, but our son has gone from being a homeless person to a homeowner.

Lacy went off to KU in 1999 and never left Lawrence. He fell in love with the town and has been living in a series of apartments ever since.

About a year ago, he decided it was time to buy a home. But he had some things he wanted in a house. It needed to be near the downtown, and he wanted an older home in one of Lawrence's traditional neighborhoods.

He also needed to find a place he could afford. He started a serious savings program and contacted a loan officer to advise him as to just how much he could spend. While that amount would have purchased a pretty nice house out here in northwest Kansas, it wasn't much for some place in Lawrence.

Still, he started looking at houses in the area he liked. He moved into a cheaper apartment, just big enough for himself and a couple of cockroaches (not that he had those, mind you). For a while, he worked two jobs and pretty much gave up dating.

By the time he was getting serious in his search, and he was calling home and telling us about houses he had looked at, it was July.



cynthia haynes

• open season

In Lawrence, the rental market is geared to students, and you rent with a year's lease from Aug. 1 to July 31.

Lacy hadn't signed a new lease because he knew he couldn't afford to pay for two places, so he was suddenly without an apartment or a house. He had, however, made backup plans. His friend John had a basement with a spare bedroom and bath. Lacy packed up his stuff and became a basement dweller.

Then he found the house on Connecticut Street. He put in a bid with the stipulation that the owners put on a new roof. The owners countered with a higher offer and agreed to the roof.

Over the next month, he worked with the loan company and the government, which was guaranteeing his new-homeowner loan, to ready the place for the transfer.

Last Wednesday, he got homeowner's insurance and put the utilities in his name. On

Thursday, he signed the papers and started painting the bedrooms.

It's a cute little place, more than a century old, with two upstairs bedrooms and a downstairs bathroom. Built in 1906, it has floors that slope and a little front porch that is brightly painted but ready to fall off.

On the plus side, it has a refrigerator, washer, dryer, dishwasher and garbage disposal. On the minus side, it has a hookup for a gas stove and no central air. But, the window units he found neatly stored inside his small garage, and he got a check from Mom and Dad for Christmas to help buy a new stove.

He's one happy man. But, he admitted over lunch on Sunday, he still doesn't quite feel like a homeowner. Each night after work, he goes over and works on the house – everything needs paint and the hardwood floors need to be refinished before he can move in.

He says it just feels like all those times he's helped friends work on their places.

Still, he's envisioning where his furniture will go and hoping to be in his new home by Christmas.

He says if we bring a bed, he'll be happy to have us stay over anytime. And we could save a lot of money that way, except whenever we get near his house, he puts us to work.

Unlikely speedway operator

What sort of person would you expect to be running a NASCAR track?

Some good ol' boy who went to a southern college and grew up around race tracks?

Or maybe a guy with a law degree from some stuffy place like the University of Kansas, plus a law degree from KU, and a Master of Business Administration from the prestigious University of Chicago?

Arace fan, or a button-down guy who spend much of his career in a major college athletic department?

You may be able to see where this is going. For the president of the Kansas Speedway is not your everyday Bubba.

Pat Warren joined the athletic department at KU under former Athletics Director Bob Frederick, a legendary figure at the university. He said he loved working there but left after Frederick was eased out. He went to Chicago and got the MBA, assuming he was out of sports for a while.

And when he applied for the job at the speedway, he said, he had to be honest. He told the NASCAR people he knew next to nothing about stock-car racing.

“They told me they didn't like to hire race



steve haynes

• along the sappa

fans,” he told Associated Press editors meeting in Kansas City this week. “When they did, nobody got any work done on race weeks.”

Listen to him talk, though, and you can tell that Mr. Warren has become, if not a true race fan, a fan of the business and the people it draws. He likes to talk about the family atmosphere at the tracks and the way a race is open to everyone, fans and the media alike, in a way almost no other sport can claim.

Where else do the stars sign autographs and mingle with fans before an event? he asks. Where else is the equivalent of the locker room as open as the pits of a track?

And he compared access to drivers' radio frequencies and in-car cameras to football fans being able to listen in on the coach, the offensive coordinator and the quarterback. As if that'd ever happen.

Having two NASCAR races a year is the

economic equivalent of two all-star games a year for Kansas City, he says, but the track is challenged to fill its seats for both races if the second one is to stay in Kansas for the long term.

The track, which has about 35 year-around employees, already is credited for creating more than 5,000 permanent jobs in once-poor Wyandotte County and with prompting millions in associated investments in shopping and hotels around the area. It's all been done without public money, he said, except for improvements paid for through tax-increment financing paid for by the valuation of new development.

Now Mr. Warren is an evangelist for motor racing, urging everyone to come see what the sport is all about – and to be sure to put on a headset and listen in on their favorite driver, so we learn what it's all about, not just noise and fast cars, but knowledge and logistics on a high order.

It probably doesn't take an MBA to understand NASCAR, but apparently, it doesn't hurt.

State House and Senate elect new leaders

Monday, Dec. 3, we met at the capitol to elect leadership for the Kansas Legislature. Ray Merrick, Johnson County, was chosen as Speaker of the House. Susan Wagle, Wichita, was selected as the President of the Senate. She is the first woman to hold that position. Both individuals are very conservative and have years of experience. The first tasks they have is to assign us all to committees, assign rooms, and make the legislative calendar for the upcoming session. I won't know what committees I will have for a few more weeks.

The state revenue estimators predicted a \$705m drop in revenues for the upcoming fiscal year, which starts July 1, 2013. The effect of this year's budget, which created a roughly \$500m surplus, helps reduce the depth of the financial hole facing the state in its upcoming budget year. The fall-off in state revenues will leave us at about \$473m and it will mean that we will need to either have increased revenues,



from other pens

• ward cassidy

spending cuts, or some combination of the two to come up with \$332m to achieve the constitutionally required \$0 budget balance.

A big part of the deficit could be made up by extending the due-to-expire July 1 penny sales tax. It is worth about \$262m to the State General Fund. My guess is that the legislature will not want to renew the tax unless the Governor sees too tough of a budget problem and can convince legislators to keep the tax.

The Governor receives the financial figures for his 2014 budget from a group of state fiscal experts, the budget director, and university economists. The group is referred to as the Consensus Revenue Estimating Group

(CREG). It amazes me on how accurate they can be with their predictions.

CREG estimates that wage earners in Kansas will pay \$60.8 million less in taxes in the current year than originally predicted, partly because of lower rates for individual income taxpayers. The new tax law takes effect January 1.

Ward Cassidy represents the 120th District in the Kansas House of Representatives.

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