

from our viewpoint...

# Sustainability should be the goal

Call it sustainable government. That's what this country, heck, what all the "developed" nations, including most of Europe and certainly the U.S., need to learn. Just as we need to learn to live within our energy means, the world needs to learn to live within its income, trimming government spending and "entitlement" programs to fit revenue and sustainable growth.

Most U.S. states could be added to the list, Kansas among them, though Kansas certainly is no California in terms of debt or spending or excess growth.

Still, our state has seen its budget grow far faster than the economy in recent years, driven by those federal "entitlements" that everyone likes to blame things on.

After coming into office with the state treasury literally empty after years of budget cuts and revenue shortages, Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback claims to have turned things around. Under his leadership, the Legislature produced a balanced budget with a \$700 million ending balance, or surplus, giving the state a cushion to fall back on.

That in itself was an accomplishment.

However, the governor has more far-reaching ambitions. He wants to make the state more friendly to businesses that could bring in new jobs. A big part of his plan was to lower taxes and eventually, to eliminate the state income tax.

He and the legislature made a big start on that plan this year, eliminating state taxes on most small-business income and slashing tax rates for most Kansans. The Legislature, without a doubt, botched up this plan when it got to the Senate. Senators agreed to pass a version that included all the cuts the governor proposed, but none of the revenue-producing changes he wanted.

The result could be a budget gap of up to \$700 million a year over the next few years, state experts predicted, though that gap keeps shrinking as the state's economy improves.

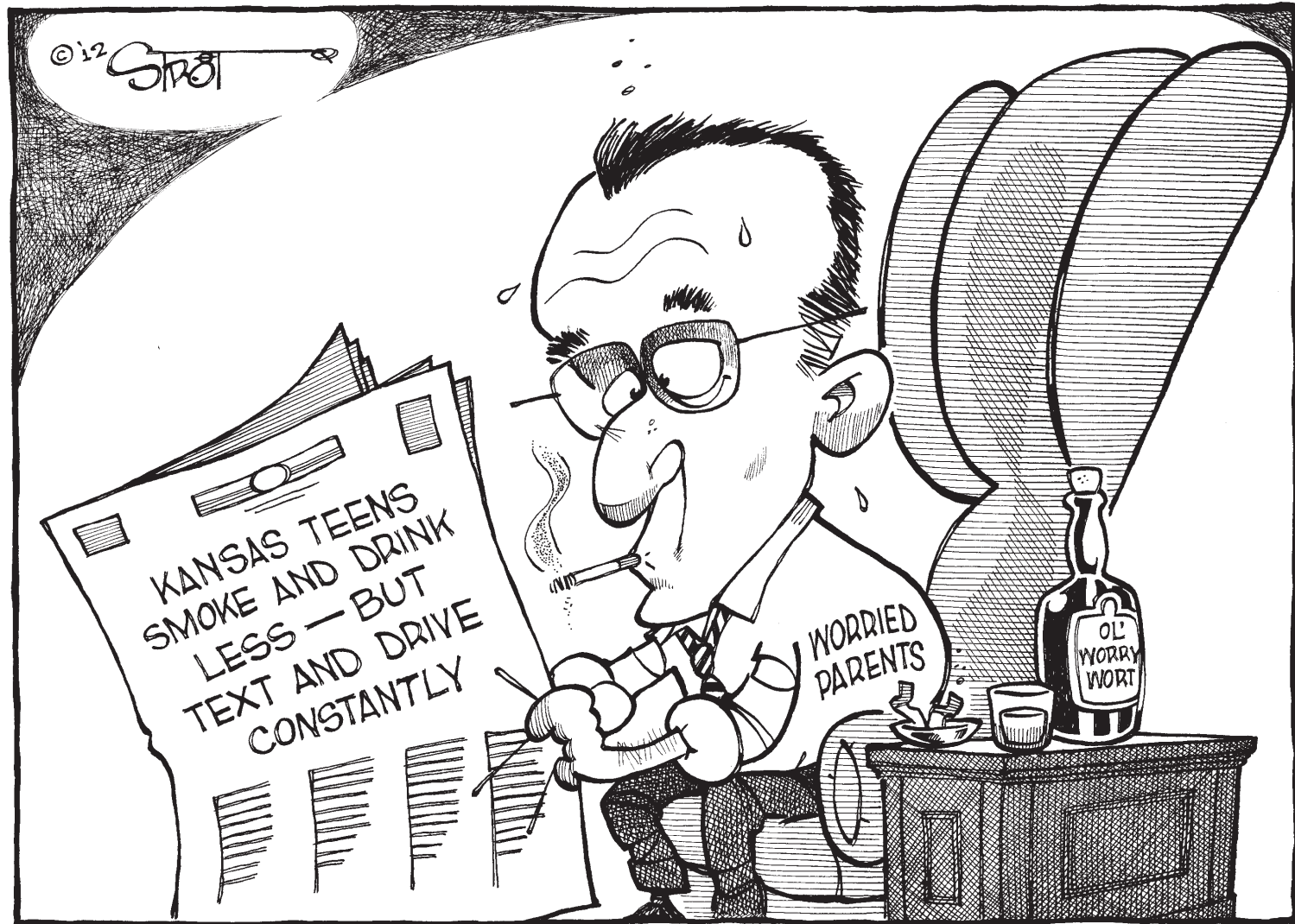
The governor's enemies were quick to claim the tax cuts would lead to massive cuts in schools and other state programs, and big hikes in local property taxes. That hasn't happened yet, of course, and it might not, but everyone agrees the tax bill passed last year is badly flawed.

The governor launched a campaign this week to re-establish some balance in the revenue picture, where he had proposed ending some popular deductions, including the one on home mortgage interest, to offset his tax cuts.

Another alternative is to keep a "temporary" sales-tax increase passed a few years ago in place of the higher income tax. Many argue that this would hurt low-income Kansans, but another argument is that a sales tax actually hits the wealthy hardest because they buy a lot more than the rest of us. There are ways to get out of the income tax if you're rich, but the sales tax applies to everyone.

There'll be opposition to any solution. The very conservative will oppose any tax or revenue increase, hoping to slash government even more. But the state does need good schools, colleges, roads and services, and it must have prisons, regulations and the like. While the administration promises to root out excess spending, there's only so much you can cut or save.

In the end, we need a solid compromise that makes the state run the way people want it to. That's critical to the governor if he wants to run for higher office again – and many believe he still wants to be president. To do that, he needs to make a success of his fiscal program. Budget Director Steve Anderson says he believes it could be a model for other states, and it might, but only if it works. A solution is important to the rest of us, too. And as in Washington, a reasonable approach that will work is what we need in Topeka. – *Steve Haynes*

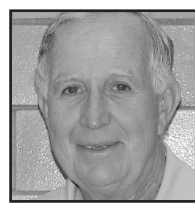


## KanCare meetings to start soon

This year, Kansas will spend about \$3.2 billion on Medicaid. With the new KanCare program, the state hopes to save about \$1 billion over five years.

Within KanCare, Kansas has awarded contracts to three Managed Care Organizations – Amerigroup, based in Virginia Beach, Va.; Centene, based in St. Louis; and United Health Care, based in Minnetonka, Minn. Each is charged with building a statewide network of providers for the full range of Medicaid services.

Starting in January, each company will be assigned a proportional share of the Kansans in Medicaid, representative of different regions, age groups and populations, including people with disabilities, the elderly and low-income children. The groups have three-year KanCare



**ward cassidy**

• state rep.

contracts.

One way to measure the financial performance of these firms is to determine how much of its revenue is used to pay for health-care services. This is known as the health benefits expense ratio. Each of the three firms selected for KanCare contracts reported a ratio as part of its financial report to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.

These three companies' ratios range from 81 cents to 85 cents of every premium dollar go-

ing to pay for services. The remainder is used for administrative costs and company profit. Kansas did not specify a specific ratio these companies must achieve during the three-year contract.

Nursing homes that have not contracted with a care manager may continue to have residents' bills paid for up to a year, so the residents won't be tossed out if they are living in a facility that isn't now a contracted provider with any of the three.

Statewide meetings will be starting soon, and there will be an attempt to answer the many questions Kansans have about this new program. I have volunteered to serve on a legislative oversight committee if there is a decision to have one.

## Slippery slope of ending cursive

A professor at Shandong Normal University in Jinan, China, confided to me over lunch after my morning lectures at his college last year, "Our students are forgetting how to write!"

The culprit was the new electronics. The Chinese-language input system for handheld smartphones as well as for computers uses an efficient system to prompt the next-most-likely character. For instance, you want to start a message with "I want..." You key in the sound of the word for "I" and the many Chinese characters that have that sound are lined up with the most common word first. You merely press 1 and that complex character is selected. But before you can key in the sound for "want," the next-most-likely characters are lined up for selection. And "want" is the most-likely second word. Click!

The result is that the user merely recognizes the Chinese character by overall "looks," or what we call Gestalt or pattern.

"The students are forgetting how to write the characters stroke-by-stroke because the computer brings it up for them," my colleague said.

Today, our cell phones are making texting easy for American children by using this same next-most-likely-word input system.

Students are trained to write without elegance or creativity. They are copying the most common and simplistic way of saying things.

Reading researchers have documented the lack of deep reading among the techie generation. We are now experiencing a similar lack of "deep writing" as teens and tweens send



**education frontlines**

• John Schrock

an average of 200 text messages a day, often using a program that narrows their literacy by offering convenience.

Even adults can feel the pull to shallow reading on an electronic screen. I find myself skimming online documents, barely reading the first line of each paragraph – something I never do with printed pages. This drop in comprehension from scrolling (in comparison with page-by-page text) by students has been solidly documented by Sanchez and Wiley in the journal *Human Factors*. But a decade of documented research means nothing to the computer enthusiasts: Anything digital is always "better."

And it gets worse. A year ago, one high school teacher pointed out that some of his students could no longer name the months of the year in order. January-February-March no longer came in that order because at any time, a student can reach for the smartphone and read the date. Like a phone number that you look up and repeat to yourself as you dial – but then never move into long-term memory, many students today never look at a calendar. They no longer have the month sequence in mind, although they did know it when they graduated from kindergarten to first grade.

Nor does the techie generation think they need to know anything if they can access it by smartphone. Their memory is more and more stored on their belts or in their purses.

The consequences are far-reaching. For the first time, China entered the international PISA competition and scored a jaw-dropping hundred points beyond prior winners in mathematics. While in China this spring, I asked my Chinese students when were they allowed to use calculators in math class: "Never before sixth grade."

What about electronic dictionaries? The limit on English was the same as math. But electronic Chinese dictionaries had to wait until later. To put it simply, Chinese students know what division and logarithms mean; American students just hit a key on the keypad. There is a reason that nearly 90 percent of graduate degrees in U.S. university engineering programs go to foreign students.

Down the road, techie futurists have an even bigger dream.

Forget cursive writing. Why are we even teaching reading? We can put books under a scanner and the computer will read them to us.

And why teach writing? Record into DragonSpeak and it will write for us.

Getting rid of cursive is just the first step. – John Richard Schrock

John Richard Schrock, a professor of biology and department chair at a leading teacher's college, lives in Emporia. He emphasizes that his opinions are strictly his own.

## Find common ground – tell your story

Helping consumers and our customers understand agriculture is vital to the future of the industry and the high-quality, affordable food Americans enjoy.

How do farmers help their customers understand their profession?

It begins with the commitment to tell your side of the story whenever and wherever the opportunity presents itself. Whether farmers talk to grade schoolers, service clubs, fellow church members or state legislators – practice the art of relationship building between rural and urban, between the farmer-stockmen and consumers of agricultural products.

The holiday season is a perfect time to tell others about the farm and ranch story. Whether we know it or not, today, many consumers are one, two or three generations removed from the farm. But just about everyone has a lawn, garden, flowers, plants or shrubbery. These same consumers enjoy, and some cherish, their ties to a father, grandfather or great-grandfather who tilled the soil.

Today's foodies have a strong desire to know about how their food is grown. Many want to meet and know the people who are furnishing



**Insight this week**

• john schlageck

their families with the food they eat.

How do you initiate a conversation about farming?

It's easy to find common ground with urban cousins. Begin by noting that the fertilizer they buy for their garden or lawn is no different from what you, as a farmer, put on your crops. The rose dust, herbicide or insecticide used to control scab, dandelions or mosquitoes are similar to the plant protection you use.

Sometimes the common denominator revolves around nutrition. A good analogy could be the parallel between a person's need for healthy food and a plant's need for a well-balanced diet.

It's easy to move from nutrition to some of the more difficult challenges facing agriculture.

One hot topic is groundwater contamina-

tion. Today, many people are concerned about chemical runoff into lakes and streams.

As a farmer-stockman, you cannot afford to overuse these expensive crop inputs. Let them know that. More than anyone else, you are concerned about the land where you and your family live and work. Tell them your family members also eat the same food they eat, and you wouldn't dream of endangering your loved ones.

Public understanding of how a modern farmer manages his operation is only half the challenge. Perhaps equally important is the need to be sensitive to the concerns of the community. Listen to what they have to say. Hear them out and also, talk to them about your continuing commitment to ensuring you grow the healthiest food possible.

Remember that people – most of them living in towns or cities – are the ones who call for regulations and new laws. It is this same public that will enforce them. In the end, ironically, it is the public that will suffer if the laws damage our food production and consumption system.

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