

Op-ed

Not broke? Leave it alone

E-mail: Ralph.ostmeyer@senate.ks.gov

At a time when budget committees want to achieve greater operating efficiencies and reduce costs to government, one obvious thing to do is consolidating departments. The Post Audit Committee has recommended the combining of the Animal Health Department and Soil Conservation Commission into the Kansas State Board of Agriculture. Post Audit believes there would be a savings of \$710,000 or 13 percent of the combined 2009 operating costs of both agencies. \$630,000 of the savings is the result of restructuring staff positions and \$80,000 comes from reducing rental costs. The combined spending of the State Board of Agriculture, Animal and Health Department, and State Conservation Commission is around \$44 million. Restructuring of these agencies has been considered several times since the mid 1990's with no action being taken. Kansas is one of the six rural farm states that doesn't place or combine animal health and conservation grants into the State Board of Agriculture.

Post Audit has proposed a bill to combine these services and I am sure there will be much debate on this issue. Initially, I tend to agree with Agriculture Chairman Tad-diken that "if it isn't broke, then don't fix it." I have always supported local control and want to make sure that the State of Kansas doesn't destroy that. I appreciate the many calls and letters on this issue. I want to study both sides of this consolidation issue so that I can be comfortable with and able to support my decision.

The savings presented throughout this report are based on a number of assumptions and estimates, and should be viewed with that in mind. I had the honor of serving on a Conservation Board and know and understand the process. My concern is that this consolidation plan would decrease local control of these agencies, and we may likely regret that in the near future.

I was pleased to have special visitors from Goodland High School to our Statehouse during this first segment of the 2009 Session. These two students have achieved prominent positions with the Family, Career and Community Leaders of America. Brennen Clouse is the National President and Shelbi Hall is the Kansas First Vice President. The FCCLA is a national organization with 220,000 members in 7,000 chapters. Dick and Sarah Short are the local FCCLA Advisers. I always admire youth who make an effort to stay involved in politics at the local level.

I have been inundated with calls and emails concerning proposed budget cuts to local schools and prisons, and local consolidation of government. I want my constituents to know that I value your input on these serious issues.

However, time does not allow me to always return each and every contact. I ask that you realize that I am considering your input on these issues, and that I pledge to keep my focus to do what is best for Western Kansas.

Please continue to send me your thoughts and know that I take your input seriously. This is a very serious time for our country and our state. More than ever we need to carefully weigh our decisions and protect our rural way of life.

To recap some of the major issues addressed this week:

√Substitute Senate Bill 23 — Appropriations for FY 2009: On Wednesday, January 28 the Senate met to debate Substitute for SB 23, the rescission bill for the 2009 fiscal year. The bill, as initially passed out of the Senate Ways and Means Committee, adjusted spending by \$300 million and included across-the-board reductions of 3.4 percent leaving a balance of \$115.5 million in the state

general fund for FY 2009 and \$209.9 million for FY 2010.

During the floor debate, the bill was amended to decrease spending by \$334.8 million. Included in the amendment was an across-the-board reduction of 1.5 percent for all areas of state government excluding K-12 education and an additional \$11 state aid per pupil reduction in school funding. For the current year, reductions in base state aid totals \$33 per student. The amendment results in a \$151.4 million ending balance in the state general fund for FY 2009.

The Senate passed SB 23 by a vote of 25 to 14.

√Senate Bill 30 — State Surplus Property. Senate Bill 30 would allow state legislators or their staff to buy off-lease state computers, those not sold will be offered to public libraries for purchase. Any remaining computers not acquired by state legislators, their staff, or public libraries would then be sold as state surplus. This provision has been included in appropriations bills in previous years as a proviso. The bill also allows state law enforcement officers to purchase their personal firearm at market cost if they resign for other employment opportunities or retire. This offer is not applicable to law enforcement officers who leave under less than desirable circumstances.

SB 30 has no fiscal note and passed 40 to 0.

√Senate Bill 34 — Open Records. The measure is a review of the exceptions to the Kansas Open Records Act. In recent history, the legislature has reviewed the exceptions in an effort to eliminate those deemed unnecessary. Of the 30 exceptions listed in the bill, 16 have long been included in the Kansas Open Records Act and 14 were added during the 2008 session as part of SB 702. No new exceptions to the Act are included in SB 34. The Senate approved the bill 40 to 0.

√Senate Bill 44- False Submission of Claims. Under SB 44 any individual who attempts to make a false claim to the state would be held liable for three times the amount of actual damages, a \$1,000 to \$11,000 civil penalty for each action, and court costs and attorney fees associated with the litigation. The bill is the result of federal legislation that encouraged states to use civil tools when pursuing cases of fraud. The bill passed 40 to 0.

√Senate Bill 45 — Kansas

Senate Doings Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer



Power of Attorney Act. This bill amends the Kansas Power of Attorney Act in three ways. First, those who are physically unable to sign a document naming a power of attorney, but who are competent and conscious can designate an individual to sign the document on their behalf in the presence of a notary public. Second, attorneys acting as a power of attorney are required to keep a record of disbursements, receipts, and other transactions conducted and are prohibited from combining assets and funds of the individual who they represent with their own. Third, procedures are authorized for those who voluntarily resign from the role of power of attorney. SB 45 was approved 40 to 0.

√Transportation Update. The Senate Transportation Committee heard the recommendations of the Interim Transportation Committee on Tuesday, January 27. The interim committee encouraged the House and Senate Transportation committees to develop a new comprehensive transportation plan that requires equity between urban and rural needs when approving new transportation projects. Other recommendations include using "practical design" for projects that do not meet federal standards.

√The Governor's T-Link Task Force met this week to finalize their report and Secretary Miller is expected to provide a review of the report next week.

Mail Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer at: 300 SW 10th, Room 262-E Topeka KS 66612, or PO Box 97, Grinnell KS 67738-0097 (office phone) 785-296-7399

(home) 785-824-3773
Toll Free 1-800-432-3924
Judy Crapser
Secretary to Ralph Ostmeyer
Senator, 40th District
phone: (785) 296-7399
(e-mail: judy.crapser@senate.ks.gov)

877-3361

Officials discuss prison

By BRANDY LEROUX
bleroux@nwkansas.com

The economy and the possibility of the prison shutting down were discussed during the end-of-the-month meeting of the county commissioners Friday at the Norton County Courthouse.

Commissioner John Miller said the state legislature probably wouldn't vote on the budget until after the April 19 tax revenue figures are in, though it's a possibility they will sooner.

"Everything is up in the air right now," said Mr. Miller. "Nothing is set in stone. We are concerned about this, and we're working to do what's best for Norton County and northwest Kansas."

Commissioner Carolyn Applegate said the best thing people can do right now is to write letters to Representative John Faber (and State Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer) voicing their concerns.

"But actually write the letters and send them through (regular) mail, so that they're holding them in their hands," said Commissioner Applegate. "It does make a difference."

"We will be in Topeka next week for a meeting with state legislators for County Government Day," said Commissioner Miller. "In the afternoon, we'll attend hearings and hopefully get a better idea of what's going to happen."

On Monday morning, a new proposal was presented to the state legislature in regards to the Department of Corrections that instead of cutting \$9 million from their budget, they would only cut \$2.7 million, which would leave parole programs in place and not require closing down any facilities, Mr. Miller said.

In other county news:
• Sheriff Troy Thomson asked the commission if he could hire a

deputy to fill the full-time slot left empty when Jody Enfield joined the city police department.

"What doesn't go down but goes up when times get tough," said Sheriff Thomson. "Crime. Our jail is full right now, and it's not going to stop. If anything, it'll get worse. I have received 14 applications for the position. Five are certified officers and two would have to go back to get their certifications renewed."

Commissioner Miller said if another deputy isn't hired, the county will end up paying more in the form of overtime. Sheriff Thomson was told to go ahead with the interviews for a deputy.

The sheriff asked to be able to put bids out for a new patrol vehicle, which was included in this year's budget. The sedan they want to replace has more than 140,000 miles on it and has become a safety issue for deputies driving it. He told the commissioners that he had to purchase a new washer for the jail, since the one that was there quit working on Sunday afternoon. Sheriff Thomson said the washer and dryer have been in use for 16 years, and was sure the dryer would quit working soon as well.

The commission told Sheriff Thomson that if it is an emergency situation, he can purchase a new dryer without getting bids first.

"I've heard from other county jails that have been sued because of staph infections," said Commissioner Miller.

• Diane Becker, Norton City/County Economic Development director, asked the county commissioners if there was anything that could be done to plan ahead in case the Norton Correctional Facility shuts down, or if there was a way to be better prepared for it. The commissioners said

there really isn't anything that can be done.

Miss Becker submitted a report from Northwest Kansas Planning and Development, and notified the commissioners that the Feb. 25 Economic Development Board meeting will start 30 minutes early. The public is invited to attend; it will start at 6:30 in the Hill City Community Building.

Miss Becker also said she had been in touch with the Department of Commerce to get a rapid-response team to Norton in light of the recent lay-offs. She said packets have been mailed to the employees who were laid off, and a workshop is being planned to teach people about unemployment benefits and how to create resumes.

Miss Becker also said her office received a letter Friday that said they did not get the grant for the Moffet Station project. She said they would look into other avenues to help fund the project.

• Cynthia Linner, Norton County Treasurer, said the county collected \$32,491 in taxes in November 2008, and that February 2007's tax income was just below \$67,000.

Mrs. Linner said she received her second computer monitor from Mortensen's Computer Supply, and it was installed Thursday.

Commissioner Applegate asked Mrs. Linner why she needed two monitors.

Mrs. Linner said there are programs that, when running, have to be shut down before she can do work in another program, and it's easier to have two monitors when dealing with incoming reports.

• The commissioners appointed Steven Berry, Warren White and Shad Chandler to the Norton County Hospital Board of Trustees.

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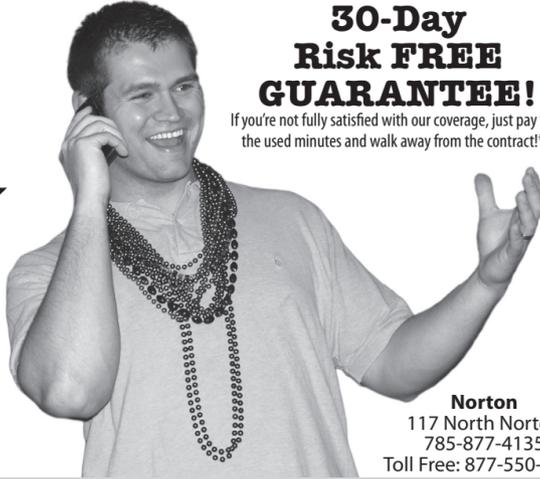
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